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When Men Look at Women

Bruce Bawer
God on the Bestseller List

James W. Tuttleton
Rehabilitating Victorian Values

Ellen Potter
Native Intelligence—a story

Robert McDowell
When Baseball Made Out

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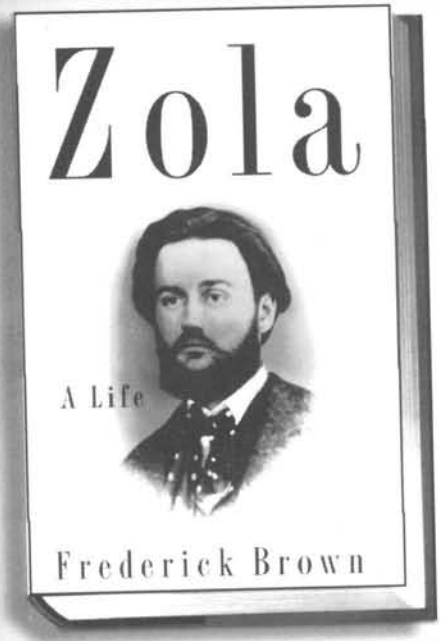

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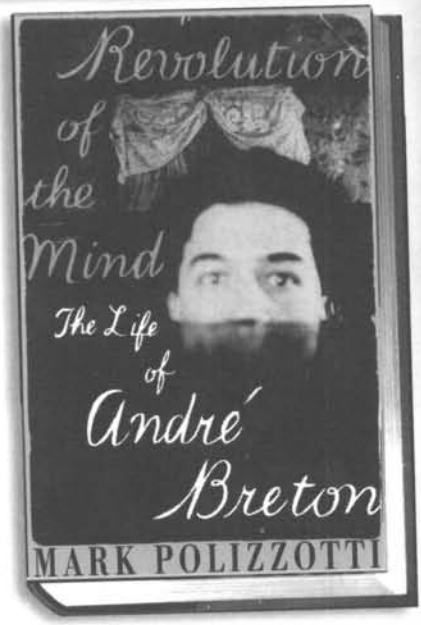

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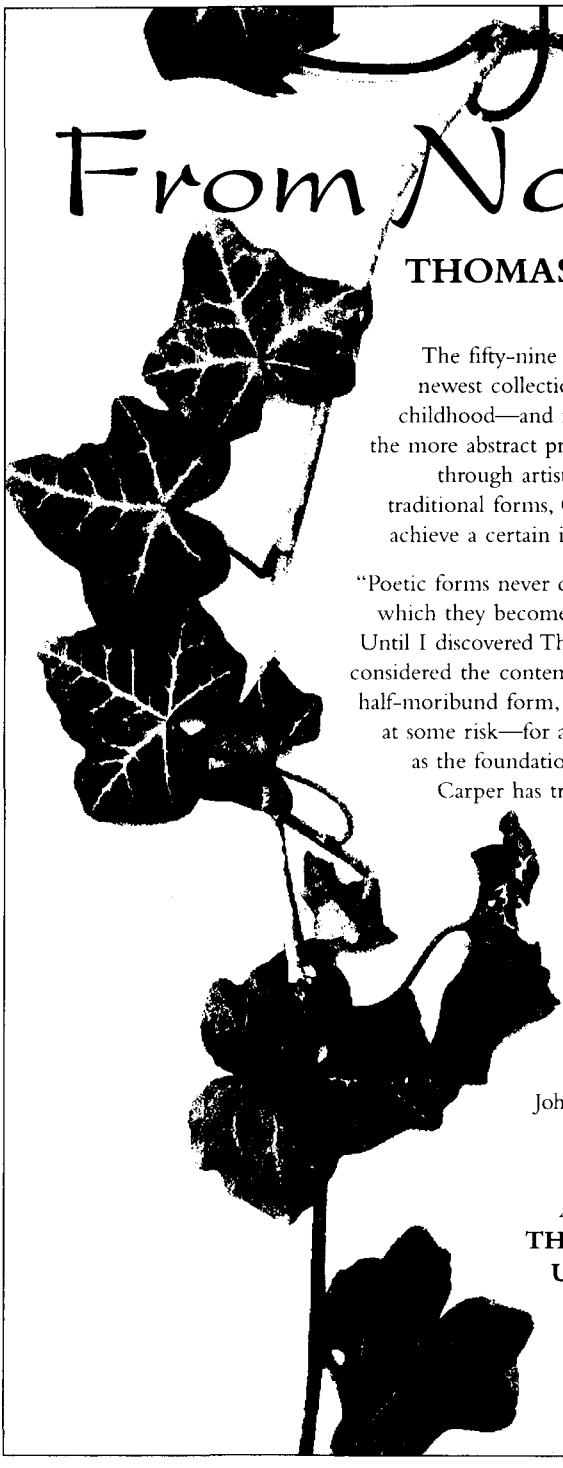

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The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

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TO OUR READERS

A new book by a Contributing Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW has recently been published. In accordance with our policy, it will not be reviewed in these pages, but is listed below for the interest of our readers:

BERT CARDULLO, ed.: *What Is Dramaturgy?* Peter Lang. $29.95.

Publication of this issue of THE HUDSON REVIEW is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a Federal Agency, and by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts. We wish to express our appreciation to these organizations for their generosity.

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THE HUDSON REVIEW is published quarterly by The Hudson Review, Inc., 684 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10021. It is indexed in the Social Sciences and Humanities Index and in the American Humanities Index. Book reviews are indexed in Book Review Index, and poems in Index of American Periodical Verse.

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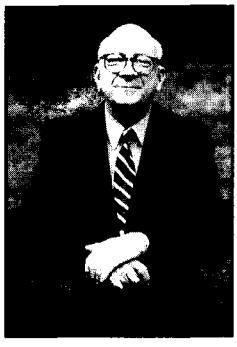
POEMS FOR PAULA

by FREDERICK MORGAN



FREDERICK MORGAN, a founding editor of *The Hudson Review*, continues today as a co-editor. He is the author of ten books of poetry, including *Poems: New and Selected*, and two volumes of prose.

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Frederick Morgan's *Poems for Paula* is that rare thing in art: an intricate, interlocking collection of lyric and meditative poems that celebrate one of the true-life, contemporary love stories (that of the author and his co-editor at *The Hudson Review*, Paula Deitz) of the last twenty-five years. Inventive, formal, wise, wry, and intelligent, these poems honor and explore the enduring, mythic power of love, and of lives taking clear and solid shape in its forge.

WORDS

How shall I say it, dear Paula?
Words may not meet the occasion.
They tend to stray off and lose contact
while love, year by year, builds in silence.

Words are like travelers, troubled
by multiple schemes and arrangements,
sometimes harassed beyond measure,
not certain they'll find satisfaction—

yet all the while trusting that somehow
they'll glean from the zest and disorder
a larger, untrammeled awareness
of what it must mean to be home.

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FRANK TUOHY

Bennett Award Acceptance Speech, 1994

I feel especially honoured in being selected for this year's Bennett Award, because among the writers you have chosen in past years are several who have extended the scope of our language and literature to present cultures and societies which have previously lacked full expression. I think particularly of V. S. Naipaul and Nadine Gordimer. I don't feel that I have ever managed to emulate their successes, but I've always been interested in the conflict between different sets of ethics caused by exile and displacement.

Moral relativism I might say lay about me in my infancy. I have attributed this to the fact that, though brought up in southern England, I felt two conflicting influences in my own family: Irish Catholic, bigoted but scarcely puritanical on my father's side, Scotch Episcopalianism fading into high-mindedness and good works on the side of my mother. For both parties, in addition, there were recent close contacts with British India. Indian influences weren't confined to the family. In those days childhood acquaintances spent holidays with grandparents while their mothers and fathers were "out East" and those houses, like our own, were ornamented with beaten brass and silver ware, uncomfortable carved furniture, rows of ivory elephants and the occasional mouldering tiger skin.

Such influences were nothing unusual in my generation. Rudyard Kipling had gone out of fashion, but at school our admired writers were still those who made the other continents alive for us in novel after novel: Somerset Maugham, E. M. Forster, Graham Greene, Joyce Cary and others now forgotten. If we had wanted to read about our own country and our own class, we would have turned to Rosamond Lehmann, Ivy Compton-Burnett and Elizabeth Bowen, all excellent in their own way but with a somewhat dispiriting lack of candour about sex (those high-spirited young heroines, were they doing it or weren't they?). To read about England we preferred George Orwell, preferably not his novels. But for *la vie quotidienne*, for the true feel of modern life, there was only one source: America.

In those days, it was enormously difficult to get hold of the American books we longed for. The London Blitz had burned up the complete stock of Henry James; he was to remain out of print for years to come. A friend training as a bomber pilot in Canada brought

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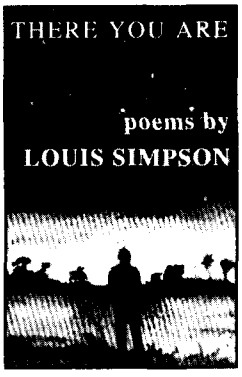

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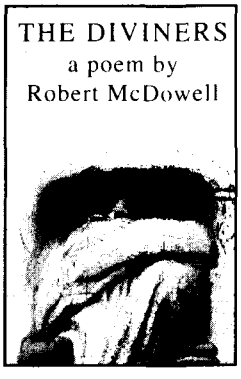

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me back *The Portrait of a Lady* in the drab Modern Library edition—we were high-minded in those days. William Faulkner was unprocurable, as he usually was. In a book called *Only Yesterday* by F. L. Allen, I found mention of a forgotten writer called Fitzgerald. In 1948 I found the Viking Portable Fitzgerald. John O'Hara's introduction, referring scornfully to Pearl Buck's Nobel Prize for Literature, suggested that writers as good as Scott Fitzgerald were unknown in Gothenburg, Sweden. Oddly, I bought my Portable Fitzgerald in Gothenburg itself. You couldn't get it in England. Whole passages of *Gatsby* lodged immediately in the memory, such as "the enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house." Then there was the guest list at Gatsby's parties, and the scene where he produces "shirts apple-green, lavender and faint orange with monograms of indian blue. . . . Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily. . . . 'It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before.' " But in a few years Fitzgerald had become part of an academic industry, and much of the bloom was gone.

In the postwar years in the bookstalls along the banks of the Seine you could find tattered copies, Tauschnitz editions perhaps, of another greatly neglected star, Edith Wharton. Much of her best work was hard to find until 20 years later, after the publication of R. W. B. Lewis' fine biography. As with Scott Fitzgerald, favorite passages stick in the memory: in *The Custom of the Country* Undine Spragg's marriage into the French aristocracy is surely the most brilliant dissection of another culture by an American novelist.

For the outsider, it is such epiphanies which make up the discontinuous fascination of American literature. There's not much point in tracing blood-lines, as you might from Fielding to Thackeray to Evelyn Waugh and Anthony Powell, or from Smollett to Dickens to H. G. Wells and V. S. Pritchett. I think of American writers like nebulae, exploding by themselves. I can't see any connection between Melville and Poe and Hawthorne and Mark Twain. It would be like comparing Emily Dickinson to Walt Whitman. Henry James seems self-created out of a myriad of influences, more American than European every time you open his pages.

More and more revelations have come with recent years. By now I am willing to neglect all of Hemingway except the earliest stories. Instead there are Salinger and Updike, Welty and Porter, Cheever and Carver. And, most of all, the extraordinary import of Vladimir Nabokov, the gamy taste of whose style is traceable to both English and American writing. (Colette wrote somewhere that all really delicious food is slightly disgusting.)

Nabokov, with three languages and four cultures at his disposal, is a reminder that in the end it is the words themselves that matter.

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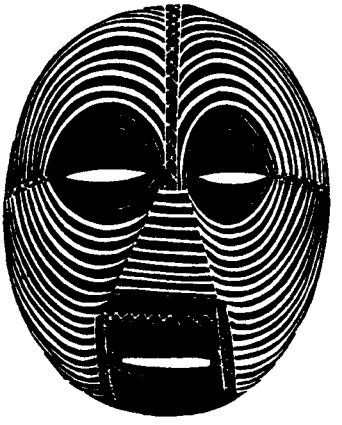

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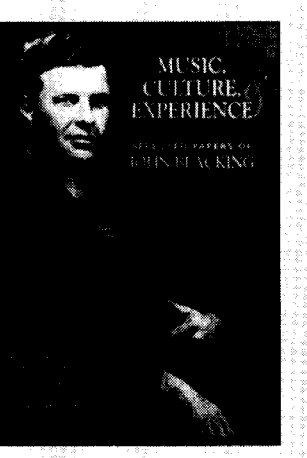

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British English, the sort I try to write, aims to preserve a decent middle ground. Our academic writing is easier, less ponderous, than the American equivalent. But how we envy American novelists and short story writers their livelier relation to the spoken word: perhaps it is still, even now, the inheritance of Huckleberry Finn.

Whatever our subjects and our obsessions, it was W. H. Auden, our shared great poet, who summed it up:

> Time . . . indifferent in a week
> To a beautiful physique
>
> Worships language and forgives
> Everyone by whom it lives . . .

To receive your magnificent award on this splendid occasion gives me the impression of being, just for once, forgiven.

The above comments were made by Frank Tuohy upon being presented with The Hudson Review's 1994 Bennett Award at a dinner in New York on June 13, 1995.

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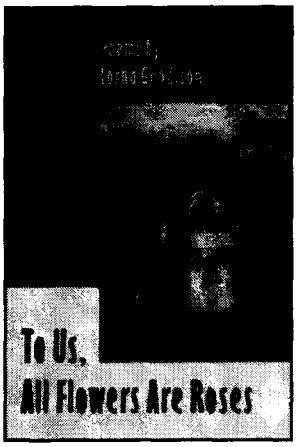

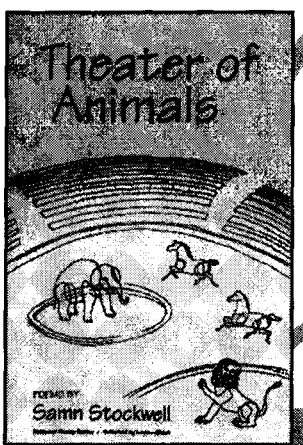

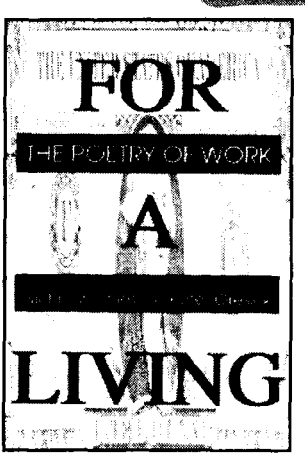

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ROBERT SCHULTZ

When Men Look at Women: Sex in an Age of Theory

The question for the women on the stage was: "Can There Be a Feminist Pornography?" I sat in an auditorium filled mostly with University of Virginia undergraduates, about two-thirds of them women. A short film on the question would be shown, the panelists would speak, followed by open discussion. As technicians fiddled with the video equipment, the room buzzed with an edgy charge that seemed to have something to do with collisions: the illicit world of porn was to be treated in the ultra-licit forum of the academic panel; the private world of arousal and desire had crashed the realm of public discussion.

I sat between two women and wondered, with some nervous defensiveness, what convictions had brought them out for the event. Women and pornography had become a hot subject, with for and against editorials squaring off in the local feminist papers. The anti-pornography position centered on violence to women—if not porn-inspired rape then its symbolic equivalent in anonymous visual consumption. The counterpoint worried about a rampant psychology of victimhood, infantilizing women and de-sexing feminism. I sat between the two young women, a man of about forty, an inevitable representative of the gender and generation in power.

The lights finally dimmed and the film rolled (balanced to a fault), then the panelists began, all of them young UVa professors. "Can There Be a Feminist Pornography?" A sociologist thought not, thumping the podium periodically in anger. When she ended, the woman on my left applauded politely, as I did, while the woman on the right kept her hands in her lap. Pornography seemed relatively harmless to the literary critic, who was more concerned with free speech and privacy, and her presentation was clearly more in line with the sentiments of the audience. Then an artist spoke of painting nudes in which she

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was trying to undercut old sexual conventions and explore the erotic in postures of awkwardness. And, most poignantly, a political scientist struggled to define a stance in which she could publicly support anti-pornography lawyer Catherine MacKinnon and at the same time preserve a private realm in which to work out a personal sexuality without ideological dictates.

I was surprised and delighted by the genuine debate, by the room it made between established battle lines for individual scruple and misgiving. But, finally, I was more surprised that the question at issue had been asked at all. It brought with it other questions, just as hot, just as delicate: How does feminism deal these days with female sexual desire? And what about that bewildering gulf which sometimes yawns between our belief and our behavior in these matters? (If the personal is political, is the intimate subject to political critique?) And, finally, how similar or different are men and women when it comes to sex and looking?

I had been thinking and writing about these questions, myself—chiefly in a novel about a male painter persisting in the old-fashioned and much-assailed genre of the female nude. And my story was leading me more and more deeply into questions of male sexual "guilt" and "innocence," particularly in the act of sheer looking. I wasn't much interested in pornography, as a subject, but it sharpened some of the issues. I sat in the audience, wondering what this panel meant for relations between men and women in the fraught realms of sex and ideology. But I wondered, most of all, how the evening's unlikely question—"Can There Be a Feminist Pornography?"—had come to seem so central. The starting point, I believe, is in "male gaze" theory, which, twenty years ago, began to give women and men new eyes for old images.

New Eyes for Old Images

In the magazine ad, the blonde's spiked heels make her calves flex and her hips thrust forward. Because of the straight skirt and the short jacket with padded shoulders, she appears slightly top-heavy as she wobbles vulnerably on those too-small shoes. Nevertheless, she manages an ambiguous smile which

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allows one to imagine that the pose is her own device, an invitation perhaps. Looking at the photo, we (we men) can take it in with the same old fascination. The photographer and the ad agency assume that we will. But with that familiar allure, judgment arrives. Our experience of such images has been doubled, baffled. Two decades of feminist criticism of the visual arts has taught us that our culture's images of women in paintings, films, television, and still photography tell us more about the male imagination than about the reality of women. We have learned (as the physicists already knew) that to look is an intrusive act, altering what is seen. For many men, if it was ever possible to look at a provocative image of an attractive woman and respond only with instinctive simplicity, those days are gone.

Beginning in 1975 with Laura Mulvey's founding essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," male gaze theorists have regarded our culture's man-made images of women as the artifacts of male sexuality, analyzing how their patterns reveal the wishes, fears, and strategies of obsession. And so every representation of a woman—from a Modigliani nude to a Hitchcock film to a billboard featuring a svelte model in an ad for Black Velvet whiskey—can be "read," not for pleasure, and not for what it tells us about women, but for what it tells us about men. We have been shown that when a man regards such an image, he isn't looking at a woman, really, but at a complicated sort of self-portrait. Everything has been arranged by conventions of his own making, shaped by his desire. The image is what he requires, and the woman represented is a missing person—an object and mirage.

To have acquired this second sight, to have been given new eyes for old images, is to have fallen out of a peculiar kind of innocence in which men could revel unself-consciously in voyeurist pleasures. In that old male Eden, Eve pulled on her sheer stockings one at a time, and Adam watched, happily mesmerized in the grip of what he assumed were primordial attractions. But now we must ask: Whence those nylons, those razored and lotioned legs? And who's pointing the camera, following, in close-up, the tantalizing progress from ankle to knee to thigh? Was the scene ordained by God and nature: essential man and essential woman enacting the dictates of

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timeless passion? Or did we, at least partly, make it up? And if we did, why this way, for whose benefit, and at what cost?

The Destruction of Pleasure

"It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article." So wrote British film critic Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Her aim was to expose the conventions of narrative cinema, which, she argued, grew out of the need by men to control the threatening female "other." With the help of psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey described a drama of compensation in which a film's gaze overcomes male sexual anxiety, bringing female characters under a controlling surveillance or rendering them as pleasure-giving fetish objects. In the madhouse of contemporary American sexuality, it is a compelling theory. Here's how it runs:

Sexual anxiety drives the gaze. A man's pleasure in watching Marlene Dietrich, Marilyn Monroe, or Sharon Stone on the screen is artfully wrought out of the deep misgivings she stirs. Her difference and mystery arouse an anxiety that is sexual and, usually, subliminal. In psychoanalytic terms, a man, confronted by the biological difference of a woman, suffers castration anxiety—for Freud the origin of the entire symbol-making enterprise. According to male gaze theory, films deal with this intolerable anxiety in two ways. One strategy Mulvey describes is voyeurism, in which the disturbing woman is relentlessly investigated in an effort to demystify her. In the process she is often found in some way guilty, in need of punishment or saving. Either way, she comes under male judgment and control. Mulvey's examples are drawn from the tradition of *film noir* and particularly the work of Alfred Hitchcock. But we might also think of *Sea of Love*, in which Helen (played by Ellen Barkin) is suspected of murdering a series of men she has slept with. Frank Keller (a cop played by Al Pacino) is assigned to the investigation and falls in love with Helen. He keeps his true identity as a cop a secret as he works obsessively to untangle desire from fear. She might be saved for him if he can prove her innocence, but this woman is no "innocent," and that is the source of both fascination and danger. Frank finally discovers

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that the killer is Helen's estranged husband who, driven mad by her sexual freedom, has been stalking her lovers. She has not killed them, but her sexuality has had everything to do with their deaths. Frank dispatches the husband and, as the film ends, seeks to replace him. So Helen is "saved," but, according to a "male gaze" interpretation, she has fallen under male surveillance and control.

The second way to deal with a dangerous woman in film is to transform the disturbing "other" into an icon of pleasure. Hence the cult of the female film star. In Mulvey's terms, the star is "overvalued" in a "complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object." Mulvey cites the nearly plotless films in which Marlene Dietrich's physical presence arrests the action when arm, leg, or face is offered up as erotic spectacle. Andy Warhol corroborates Mulvey, pointing out the use of Marilyn Monroe as fetish object when he renders her face—head tipped back, red lips parted—in row after row of mechanically reproduced images. We can multiply for ourselves from movies, paintings, ads, TV, and pinups uncountable instances of women, posed and cropped, displayed for rapt contemplation. They are everywhere—on highway billboards, on ads in supermarket aisles, and in city streets where they cruise eerily on the sides of buses. They are scattered like parks or resorts, little retreats for the male imagination, strokes to the ego and hooks for commerce.

In either kind of looking—voyeuristic or fetishist—the gaze runs one way. Men look; women are to be looked at. Active men project their fantasies upon passive women, who are "styled accordingly." At the movies, what we see on the screen is not a woman, Mulvey argues, but "an illusion cut to the measure of desire." And if the cost of freeing women from their assigned role as erotic spectacle is the destruction of a particular species of male pleasure, the price is reckoned a bargain.

Saving Eros

The last word of Mulvey's ground-breaking essay is "regret." It closes a sentence which dismisses regret as merely sentimental, a small price to be paid by women "whose image has con-

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tinually been stolen and used." Yet the word, in its final position, echoes. The small regret she acknowledges and dismisses is not at the loss of male pleasure, but the loss of traditional narrative cinema as a whole, whose conventions she finds unredeemably involved with the male gaze. She remembers her own early fascination with Hollywood's "magic" in her more innocent days of viewing, and the new avant-garde counter-cinema she calls for is vaguely limned, its pleasures uncertain. So the repudiation of traditional cinema carries the resonance of a fall, even if she believes it will prove a fortunate one.

As male gaze theory gradually finds its way into the popular consciousness, regret, for men, will be something different. Confronted by male gaze theory, many men have already felt that a whole world of gratifications is under question. Everything they had assumed about heterosexual desire and "the natural order of things" is under dispute. Reaction by men is likely to be especially sharp because male gaze criticism in the realm of art has everything to do with lived sexuality. It is a political criticism, catching out the machinery of sexism in artifacts that can be seized upon and studied, artifacts that both reflect and construct ways of looking, thinking, and behaving in the offices, streets, and bedrooms of daily life.

But even some feminists, reasoning the implications of male gaze theory, have expressed reservations. Their chief objection has been that Mulvey casts women too narrowly in the role of object, with masochistic female spectators and actresses colluding in their own exploitation. More broadly, recent books by Katie Roiphe, Christina Hoff Sommers, and Nadine Strossen have sought to counter what they deplore as feminism's tendency toward a "cult of victimhood." But what interests me most personally, as a man who stands indicted by male gaze theory, is the complaint that it leaves no space for heterosexual desire. Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, in their book *Re-making Love*, ask about sex, generally: ". . . if sex is the ratification of male power, then will it not always be a secret refutation of everything feminism stands for? Does feminism have any real option but to be puritanical or, what amounts to the same thing, utterly silent on the subject of sex?" In terms of male gaze theory, the question might go like this: If

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we can't represent a pleasurable and just heterosexuality, can we imagine it? And if we can't imagine it, how can we live it?

Troubled by such questions, Mariana Valverde, in her book *Sex, Power, and Pleasure*, has re-examined the notion that to find pleasure in someone as object is always to be condemned. Recognizing that sexual love finds its expression through a body present to the senses, she accepts "objectification" as long as there is reciprocity. "An eroticism that is both sexy and egalitarian," she writes, "is one in which both partners are simultaneously subject and object, for one another as well as for themselves." Naomi Segal, a British author with a similar interest in defining a feminist heterosexuality, has written an essay entitled "Why Can't a Good Man Be Sexy? Why Can't a Sexy Man Be Good?" Some feminists are defining a new project: the work of aligning public theory and private desire. And one approach has been to explore in popular culture instances of an active, desiring female gaze.

One response to male gaze theory by someone who *possesses* a male gaze has been made by Edgar Snow. Writing in sympathy with the political goals of the theory, he wonders if it might be self-defeating if applied too broadly. "It seems to me," he says, "that such a theory can—and in practice often does—become an unwitting agent of the very forces of surveillance it wishes to oppose. . . . Nothing could better serve the paternal superego than to reduce masculine vision completely to the terms of power, violence, and control, to make disappear whatever in the male gaze remains outside the patriarchal." With Snow's caution in mind, one pauses to reflect upon the surprising alliance of Andrea Dworkin and Catherine A. MacKinnon with Reagan attorney general Edwin Meese in the 1986 federal report on pornography. For two feminist authors to collaborate with a conservative attorney general in the production of a highly paternalistic report seems, at first, ironic. Upon reflection, however, their common ground begins to appear.[1] The two women may have felt they were making a deal with the devil, but there was an odd, imprecise symmetry between their ideology and that of the Reagan justice department. The

[1] For a prior discussion of this subject, see the introduction to Linda Williams' excellent book, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible."* Berkeley, 1986.

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anti-pornography legislation that Dworkin and MacKinnon had drafted for the city of Minneapolis emphasized depictions of violent, coercive sex, defining men as active oppressors and women as passive victims. Like them, Meese emphasized a dark side of sex, and he felt certain that the government had a right to regulate it. All of them were deeply invested in the fact of patriarchy and the vulnerability of women within it. The horrors of sexual violence in America are not to be minimized, but as the panel at the University of Virginia illustrates, women are increasingly divided both on the question of how pornography relates to violence against women and on the question of censorship, generally. But Dworkin, MacKinnon, and the Meese commission were all for censorship as protection against a masculine gaze which (to borrow Snow's formulation) consists only of power-seeking and violence. Any more benign way of looking was ruled out for want of the theoretical terms to describe it.

Camille Paglia, the inflammatory cultural commentator, has an entirely different perspective. She calls male gaze theory a stale cliché and accuses "academic feminism" of having "a man problem." She attacks what she calls "its puerile, paranoid fantasy of male oppressors and female sex-object victims." "Woman is the dominant sex," she declares. "Woman's sexual glamour has bewitched and destroyed men since Delilah and Helen of Troy." Far from wishing to undermine Hollywood's conception of female beauty and visual pleasure, Paglia situates its popular images within a Western tradition reaching back to Egyptian sculpture, surveying the proliferation and recurrence of sexual personae. She celebrates Elizabeth Taylor, Madonna, and "the fabrications of femininity, that exquisite theater which feminism condemns as oppression but which I see as a supreme artifact of civilization." She castigates male gaze theory and "academic feminism," generally, as positioning itself against both the body and art. In an appreciation of Madonna, she writes: "She sees both the animality and the artifice [of sex]. Changing her costume style and hair color virtually every month, Madonna embodies the eternal values of beauty and pleasure. Feminism says, 'No more masks.' Madonna says we are nothing but masks."

Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth*, also wishes to clear a

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theoretical space for sexual pleasure between men and women, but takes a position directly opposite to Paglia's. According to Wolf, the mask *is* the problem: "The fleeting chimera of the airbrushed centerfold, always receding before him, keeps the man destabilized in pursuit, unable to focus on the beauty of the woman—known, marked, lined, familiar—who hands him the paper every morning." The impossible, manufactured image intervenes between men and women, and between a woman and her own body. For Wolf, it is not a sexual persona created by and available to women, but an unreal, alienating ideal. Paglia and Wolf have clashed in print, arguing whose feminism is sexier. But each in her own way has focused upon the issue that Mulvey's work has helped to provoke: How do we reconcile theory and desire? How can heterosexual feminists fight sexism and love men? How can a "sexy" man be "good"?

Minuter Discriminations

Current male gaze theory illuminates a tragic dimension of gender relations, but we must also be able to imagine comedic or even utopian ones. The answer to discrimination is minuter discrimination—a closer approach to the individual case. If we can distinguish, for instance, between a "nude" which perpetuates old and stifling conventions and one which breaks them, we may glimpse a way forward.

Hélène Fourment, the young second wife of the relatively aged Rubens, stands against a dark background, a fur wrap slipping from her near shoulder. Her right arm reaches beneath her breasts so that her right hand can grasp the fur at her other shoulder. Her left hand holds the coat together at her hips. The pose is slightly awkward—it seems wrong to call it a pose. The painting seems instead to have the quality of a snapshot. She is caught in time, in the act of turning, with the fur slipping. Her hair is slightly disheveled, the flesh on her side under the right arm folds as she turns, and the fat around her knees and thighs is dimpled. She looks out at the painter—her husband—with an expression that is alert but at ease.

John Berger, a British art historian perceived as an ally by male gaze theorists, refuses to call Rubens' *Hélène Fourment in a*

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Fur Coat a "nude." He prefers to describe it as one of the Western tradition's rare paintings of "a loved woman, more or less naked." "To be naked," he says, "is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. . . . Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display. . . . To be on display is to have the surface of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded."

Hélène Fourment is not on display, he contends, because it is impossible for the spectator to interpose himself between her and the painter. Three factors, according to Berger, force us to recognize that we are not participants but mere witnesses to the relation between painter and subject. First, the image " 'contains' time and its experience." The woman is not merely the passive object of a gaze, but is active, in motion, and her motion implies the past and future of her relation with the one who sees and records. This body has a history and a future, which includes the woman's own will and intentions.

Second, the painting contains the painter's subjectivity, which we cannot displace in order to appropriate the image for ourselves. This subjectivity is a matter of formal arrangement: the woman's "pose" is anatomically impossible. Around the fur which covers her middle, her torso and legs cannot meet. They are slightly misaligned, and though neither painter nor viewer need be conscious of this subtle distortion, "It permits the body to become impossibly dynamic. Its coherence is no longer within itself but within the experience of the painter." Furthermore, the woman's hidden sexual center is associated, by the dark coat which covers it, with the painting's black background. As a result, she turns "both around and within the dark which has been made a metaphor for her sex." This is a painting, not just of a woman, but of a relationship. When we look at the painting, we see Hélène Fourment through the eyes of Rubens, and can only stand apart, deferring to their bond.

Finally, the painter's beloved is not idealized as an object for general fantasy. She is, as Rubens has painted her, relentlessly herself, an individual and not the representative of a group (generalized woman) or a type ("Madonna" or "whore"). The painting even includes the crucial element of banality. This banality can be seen in "Rubens's compulsive painting of the fat

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softness of Hélène Fourment's flesh which continually breaks every ideal convention of form and (to him) continually offers the promise of her extraordinary particularity." The inclusion of such banal details, Berger claims, "distinguishes between voyeur and lover." The lover does not revise his beloved toward an idealized form. He lives with her through time and change, in all her given individuality.

The answer to discrimination is minuter discrimination. If we can distinguish between a conventional "nude" and the painting of a "loved woman, more or less naked," we may begin to clear a space for passion without harm. It is a simple fact that many theorists—male and female alike—hope for and even live in such a space, viewing themselves as exceptions to the general case made by their theories. To make such a space, we must be able to distinguish the lover's gaze from the voyeur's.

Strong Women

"For me, now, it has to do with being old, not with being a woman," she said, but the principle was clear. I was visiting my Iowa City High School English teacher, Mrs. Moore, now retired. "We get into trouble with three-way transactions between two people," she said. "I don't like the way the city maintenance worker looks at the old lady—me—from across the street." She can guess his assumptions, the judgments he makes. He doesn't know a thing about her, really—her enthusiasm for abstract art, her voracious reading habits, the time she watched Las Vegas recede at night in the rearview mirror of her car like an hallucination as she headed into the desert. But he looks and thinks "old woman," feels pity or scorn according to the particular stereotype he carries around, and dismisses her. My friend sees all this in his look, sees herself through his gaze, and measures the distance between herself and the image.

That has been the experience of women in the gaze of men. What he takes to be a simple one-way interaction, she knows to be more complex. While he looks at her, she regards his image of her, and the self she knows from the inside. She is split, maneuvering in the space between. In the heroic mode (Camille Paglia's) the woman builds and uses the image, a powerful

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mask. In the pathetic mode (Naomi Wolf's) the woman is alienated from herself, victimized by imposed expectations and judgments.

The experience of most women surely lies somewhere between the heroic and pathetic. In an interview with Philip Weiss published in *Esquire* magazine, Ellen Barkin spoke about the role she played in *Sea of Love*. Her remarks describe the way a woman in the business of making images negotiates among forces she cannot entirely control:

> No actor or actress takes their clothes off cavalierly. Ever. Nobody says, "Oh, great." But in *Sea of Love* I thought it was important that the audience see that. There's an example of an aggressively sexual woman, not just, like, a passive . . . doll. But there were a few cuts where my head was not attached to my body. And I took great offense at that. You know, I took my clothes off, I'm not an idiot. But they went and chopped off my head. . . .
>
> [O]n a feminist level there's a lot wrong with that movie. Because basically what I read was a script that said, "Women who like sex cause the death of men. She's the man-eater, she's the black widow. . . ."
>
> One thing I was real conscious of was, never make excuses for this woman, because then she is a bad girl apologizing for what ultimately is bad behavior. If I had in whatever way conveyed the idea that I was judging her sexuality, then I would have reinforced the unconscious theme that ran through the script. So I had to play her real straight. She's not bad, she's just sexy. . . .

Barkin's comments are those of an actress who confronts the pressures of a misogynist script, works to subvert it, and in the process suffers the indignities of a fetishizing editor. She has her ideals, and makes a life and career among imperfect choices, struggling through.

As we all must do. And, as we go, what I find that I want most is the testimony of women. I want to know what *they* see and how *they* feel when they watch the films and look at the billboards. I want to know how a woman looks at a man or woman she desires. I want to know how the importance of "looking" compares for men and women. I crave the testimony of strong women, like the UVa panelists, and it occurs to me that what I have to offer in exchange is the testimony of one man.

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The History of Our Bodies

My wife and I have finished our shower and are toweling off in the small bathroom. Our ten-year-old daughter comes in, squeezes between us, and gets into the shower, herself. She is a pink blur in the steam behind the colored fish painted on the shower curtain that she and her brother picked out. In the morning's bustle I pause. My wife is bent forward, drying her legs. She is lovely to me. I would like her to stop and look at me, too, but I'm the only one indulging in reverie this morning. I look at her with a pleasure in which my appreciation of her familiar shape is inseparable from the history of our bodies together. Just recently it has been a history involving as much illness as pleasure, as she has helped me during my recovery from a serious back injury. It has reminded me of the way we were together during her difficult first pregnancy and delivery. There is all of this in my gaze, combining with all those other times—the sharp or languid excitements of our sexual life. Near us, our daughter, the issue of these two bodies, hums softly behind the curtain.

Soon I will go to my office. I have been reading about "objectification." I stand for a moment, a man naked between the objects of his deepest affections. Could I wish that they were less bodily in their presence to me? Can I regret the animal bond that expresses and strengthens our other ties?

Seen from the vantage point of such a moment, "objectification" seems a cold and oversimplifying word. Of course, what that vilifying term means to condemn is *sheer* objectification, a person reduced to *mere* object, the object of our selfish manipulations. But it is the failure to make these minuter discriminations which condemns us to confusion. We cannot cease to be bodies to one another and therefore, to some extent, "objects" as well as "subjects." We are not disembodied monads, thank God! But if we can't cease to be objects in the world, we *can* be denied our status as subjects, and that is the problem. When our bodies are stripped not just of their clothes but of their personal histories, we are no longer persons.

That is what the billboard presents: A naked woman is pictured from the waist up against an empty white background. Her head is thrown back and her eyes are closed, while her

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hands cup her breasts. She is frozen in that pre-orgasmic moment beside the cut-line recommending a bra "so soft it feels like skin." Sheer object, she is uncomplicated by personality or a life in which acts have consequences. She is no-one's daughter, wife, or mother. She is not even a lover, with whom there might be a day before and a day after. It is impossible to imagine that she has a life apart from the pictured moment, either among others or by herself. It is impossible to imagine that she has thoughts. She functions purely as an icon of sexual gratification.

The billboard is in Milan. Its wider context restores the dimension of time. In this wider world there is youth and innocence, as young girls walk by with their bags packed for school. There is wash after wash of history, with cars parked by Roman columns. And, in the painted crucifix that the girls walk beneath, there is religion, with its vision of suffering, death, and redemption. Now the ecstatic moment, represented by the fetishized woman, can be seen as a kind of resort, an obsessive retreat away from complication and anxiety. And the ad trades on this attraction.[2]

The image does correspond to something "real" in that there is such a thing as ecstasy, a moment so intense it seems to tear one free from time and the self. It is a splendidly animal and unsentimental moment. It cannot be fully domesticated. But we do not live there. It is only a moment out of a life lived in time among other people, a moment in the history of our bodies and our moral selves. Perhaps the root problem in a certain kind of gaze is its power of abstraction, the way it refuses to connect a charged moment with any mooring context, isolating that moment to hover in a detached space of narrow contemplation.

The art of the pornographer, according to poet Robert Hass, "consists in the absence of scale." In the pornographer's hands, the Oedipus story is reduced to

> a summer meadow, breasts,
> the mossy tuft, his cock,

[2] My description of the Milan billboard and its surroundings is based upon a remarkable photograph by George Steinmetz in *National Geographic*, 18, 6 (December 1992), pp. 110-11.

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and twining legs.
There is no walled city come to.
The sphinx proposes nothing.
There is no plague.

In this analysis, pornography is bad storytelling, its stories too small, incomplete. And there is no sense of "scale" among things of greater and lesser import. Pornography may "work." It may deliver more or less what it promises. But it doesn't promise very much. As the poem asserts, pornography's stories fail to link the personal with the social, the individual story with the wider concerns of the "city." And the important questions which attach to human acts are ignored—the ironies, dilemmas, and mysteries; the conundrums which a Sphinx might propose. Pornography, in fact, posits a world in which human acts have no significant consequences. "There is no plague"—or anything else. Pornography's "stories" present life as a series of occasions, isolated and discrete, which cannot build toward a meaningful crisis. The "climax" of pornography makes nothing happen. It might be repeated in a fantasy of plenitude, but it changes nothing. And if there's no change, there's no story. Finally, even the experience at the heart of pornography is reduced to a narrowed, unsatisfactory version of itself. Pornography is a one-act play: the sex act reduced to its biological mechanics.

The impersonal and abstract may be components of desire. (The Greeks told themselves that when lovers felt passion for each other an otherworldly third presence—Aphrodite's—was in them.) But even if desire is a combination of the impersonal and the personal, in the current cultural mix we have a surplus of the abstracted image and a scarcity of individual presence.

In the realm of image-making, the present task is to discover those compelling new images and stories which refuse the old ways. I disagree with Mulvey that narrative itself is doomed to carry forward oppressive conventions. Only narrative—the following of characters through meaningfully linked events—can situate the image within the moral realm of action, consequence, and reflection. Narrative sinks the image in time, sorts cause and effect, and allows us to think about what happens. In narrative, individuality is clarified and relationship defined. We

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think through stories, and we need convention-busting stories that reflect with originality upon matters of "scale" and value; that can link personal histories with the concerns of the "city"; that can meditate on the riddles of sex, difference, and equality.

New Stories

If I disagree with Mulvey's rejection of narrative cinema, I tend to agree with her pessimism about traditional Hollywood's capacity for radical change. It is true that we are beginning to see more Hollywood films which invite viewers—both men and women—to identify with active, female protagonists; and there are stories (a precious few) which place as high a value on sexual intimacy as they do on sex as appetite and act. But *Thelma and Louise*, the sensation of 1991, provides a good instance for discussing why such change comes so slowly to Hollywood and why that "change" is so often illusory.

We all know that movies are expensive to make and that the industry must turn profits. Hollywood tends, therefore, to be formula-bound and its innovations almost always come from repetitions, variations, or reversals of time-tested stories. *Thelma and Louise* is usually described as a "buddy movie" in which the buddies aren't men but women—"*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* with chicks." Such reversals are, in their cautious and mechanical way, provocative. They can shake us up when we recognize how differently we react to women in situations that we generally associate with men.

Thelma and Louise is, in many ways, quite a good movie: it admits among its several louts two sympathetic men—one a lover and one a cop—so the story shouldn't be charged with male-bashing. And director Ridley Scott's lingering shots of Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon through the windshield of their T-bird are ravishing. The great photographer of the female nude, Edward Weston, once said that you could photograph a woman's face or her sex, but not both at once, and *Thelma and Louise* concentrates on its protagonists' faces in a subversion of "male gaze" fetishism. But the problem with role reversal movies like *Thelma and Louise* is that they do nothing to expand our traditional frame of reference. After they've pro-

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vided their conceptual jolt, they leave the old terms and categories intact. At the end of the movie it's "*déjà vu* all over again," as Yogi Berra would say: Mulvey's male oppressors and female victims are incarnated here in an army of macho Smokies aiming rifles at the cornered heroines. No wonder the women can only drive together off a cliff.

Like Hollywood, Madison Avenue usually finds "originality" by playing changes on old standards. A recent Diet Coke ad depicts a floor of female office workers who convene for a daily soda break at a time chosen to coincide with the break taken by a male construction crew working below. The men, sweaty and virile, strip off their shirts and guzzle their own Cokes while the women look on and coo appreciatively. Here the traditional male gaze has been neatly transformed into a female gaze. Now the idealized men (they all possess perfect washboard abs) are the passive and unknowing objects surveyed by the actively gazing women. When I saw this clever, well-produced ad for the first time, I laughed. But is this progress, a blow for equality and a step toward an ideal of male-female reciprocity? It may be, if you reject the puritanical assumption that any distanced, objectifying gaze is corrosive, no matter who is looking at whom. But I'm uneasy with the ad's blithe assumption that men and women, in matters of looking and desire, are essentially the same. The ad, however, cannot concern itself with such scruples. Its humor lies in "revealing" an essential symmetry: men and women lust equally and in the same perceptual mode. What stake, besides the opportunity for an easy joke, does the ad have in this claim?

The ad I've described is intent, of course, on selling its product. Its purpose is not to critique the male gaze or socially constructed gender roles. (And men, far from being offended by the ad, are probably flattered. Isn't it one of our fantasies to be gazed at appreciatively and longingly?) The ad, in fact, is deeply conservative, achieving a tricky perpetuation of advertising's sustaining mechanism: the longing gaze, fixed upon the product or a proffered surrogate. As John Berger has argued, the *distance* involved in looking is what advertising is all about. An ad is made to *create* distance between a presumably enviable model and the man or woman who looks at the ad. (Again, a passage from a poem by Robert Hass comes to mind: "Longing,

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we say, because desire is full / of endless distances.") The product, of course, is offered as the way to close this painful distance, and so it is the business of advertising to keep us endlessly in pursuit of consumer happiness. We must look and want. The gaze must be sustained despite any sociopolitical upheavals. And if the male gaze can be supplemented by a female gaze, all the better.

Especially in television and print advertising in the past five years, we have begun to see an exploration of the erotic male body. And, again, we can view this development as a welcome step toward more equal treatment of men and women, and one which refuses to pursue equality through the puritanical condemnation of every desiring gaze. But who are these images for, and how do these ads really work? Are they meant to appeal to a presumed female gaze, or are they intended to be primarily homoerotic, in recognition of the size and affluence of the male "gay market"? More disturbing for some straight men, perhaps, is the possibility that the lithe male physiques and arched torsos of the Calvin Klein ads, whatever their intentions, actually do appeal to *them*. Naomi Wolf has said that the message which advertising's idealized and eroticized female models send to heterosexual women is this: if you want to feel like that, you've got to look like that, and if you want to look like that, buy the product. Perhaps men—gay and straight, alike—are now being given the same message.

As moviegoers and "consumers," generally, we vote with our dollars, and so it can be argued that, statistically speaking, we get what we want. In the summer of '94, what we seemed to want was Arnold Schwarzenegger, Harrier jump-jets, and Jamie Lee Curtis in a little black dress. (And, strangely, we also wanted the opposite: that sweet and sexless idiot, Forrest Gump. Our thinking about the male in American culture is *that* polarized.) But for all the forces which tend to prevent our mass culture from experimenting boldly, there are (and long have been) exceptional and serious stories which think provocatively about men, women, sex, and power.

Alfred Hitchcock and the *film noir* tradition were particular examples in Mulvey's indictment of films that have constructed and perpetuated an oppressive male gaze. Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*, a latter-day *film noir* classic,

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might be specified. In each film the male protagonist stalks and investigates the female lead obsessively and voyeuristically. And in each case erotic fascination fuels a gaze which discovers at last the woman's guilty secret and leads, in the end, to her death. This summary of the two films would seem to confirm Mulvey's interpretation and bolster her theory, but what is the effect of each story, as a whole, for the discerning viewer? Hitchcock's presentation of Jimmy Stewart's character, Scottie Ferguson, seems arranged to expose his pathology, especially in the scenes in which he remakes the object of his fascination by specifying hair color, style, and clothing for Judy in order to recover "Madeline" (Kim Novak). His gaze must be satisfied and Hitchcock's direction insists upon Scottie's anxiety and cruelty which rise up harder and harder as Judy/Madeline is deprived of her individuality, her humanity, and ultimately her life.

In *Chinatown*, the plot articulates the way a detective's relentless probings lead directly to the death of a woman who is wrongly suspected of murdering her husband. Her "guilt" consists only in having been the victim of incest, and when Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) unearths that secret he arouses the murderous patriarch. Furthermore, while Jake woos and investigates the unfortunate Evely Mulwray (Faye Dunaway), he mentions an earlier case which turned out badly. We are led to believe, therefore, that the disastrous pattern of his relation with Mrs. Mulwray is a recurrence, underscoring the guilty nature of his uncontrollable gaze. We must have the critical wit and agility to discriminate between films, images, and stories which merely exhibit the male gaze and those remarkable works which deliberately analyze and critique it.

Even in *Sea of Love*, an alternative reading can complicate our view. A female colleague whose critical perceptiveness I respect told me she doesn't believe *Sea of Love* to be misogynist. Instead, she admires the way the character Helen acts with personal and sexual freedom equal to any man's. And when Helen catches her lover-detective in his duplicities, she breaks with him. Finally, Helen's integrity and her firm rejection of Frank's "lies" are the motive force in his recovery from the post-divorce paranoia, depression, and alcoholism that he has suffered throughout the story. According to this interpretation, *she* saves

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him, and the story ends as the two begin the process of getting to know one another all over again, having shed the projections, suspicions, and falsehoods that plagued them earlier.

Interpretation driven by ideology tends to find what it looks for, and the political urgency which drove the development of male gaze theory in the 1970s demanded that, as a critical tool, it be unequivocal and sharp-edged. For that reason, it is by nature ill-equipped for subtler, complicating discriminations. Is David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* an analysis and critique of the pathological linking of sex and violence or simply another instance of it? It takes close attention, critical tact, and free argument among a variety of interpreters to answer this question and others like it.

Male gaze critics have a particular blind spot when it comes to parody, potentially one of the most powerful tools for undermining such a thing as the male gaze. Gill Saunders, in her book, *The Nude: A New Perspective*, charges Tom Wesselman's series of "Great American Nudes" with perpetuating a fetishistic treatment of the female figure. *Great American Nude 56* (1964) is typical with its pinup pose, cartoonish rendering, blank face, bikini lines that emphasize the pelvic and breast areas, and its symbolism of flowers (in proximity to the vulva) and round fruit (in proximity to the breasts). Two big stars and a stripe—elements of an outsized American flag—provide background. Saunders says: "This is woman reduced to a sexual object, . . . a consumer commodity." Undeniably so, but the painting's extreme simplifications, the obviousness and crudity of its symbolic elements, and its overall air of self-consciousness, make this either a very bad painting or a parody. Its clownish exaggerations would seem to force upon the viewer a ridiculing awareness of voyeurism, fetishism, and the presentation of woman as commodity. (My one question about Wesselman's project, if it is parodic, is why it requires an extensive series to make what is essentially a very simple statement. In the absence of inherent stylistic or compositional interest, each painting "says" the same thing. The production of so many similar works reopens issues of obsession and market-driven opportunism.) It might be argued that any misogynist work could be saved by calling it parody or "analysis," but I am arguing for the kind of minute attention to individual cases

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which would resist categoric interpretations, whether they issue from male gaze criticism or a defensive reaction to it.

Parody and satire, along with the kind of genre-subverting self-consciousness which I find in *Vertigo* and *Chinatown*, are "destructive" in the same way Mulvey intended male gaze criticism to be. They close a cycle of work that has become conventional or degenerate and challenge artists to discover new beginnings. I see the promise of such beginnings in films such as Jane Campion's *The Piano* and Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Blue*.

The Piano is filled with surprises, as an apparently powerless woman negotiates her way toward an unlikely happiness, chiefly due to her passionate will. One surprise is that the film's mute mail-order bride wins her way forward because the two men involved with her in their strange backwoods life are, despite their faults, capable of changes unexpected by the audience or themselves. The woman *is* forced to barter her one inherent power—sex—as she pursues what she wants, but that power proves to be so strong, in Campion's view, that it converts a mere opportunist into her illicit lover. Another surprise occurs in what we expect to be a standard confrontation scene between lover and vengeful husband, when the husband lowers his shotgun in mid-scene and falls into reflection. The clumsy, addled man has been so overpowered by his wife's sensuality and her lover's forthrightness that he is literally disarmed. The violent, climactic battle of film convention is replaced by a scene of negotiation.

Kieslowski's *Blue* takes its female protagonist through loss, grief, and solitude to the beginnings of recovery in a story in which the gender of the protagonist hardly seems to matter. The film's theme is redemption, and it is treated at such a sublime level that sexual difference is virtually dissolved in what we share as human beings. But with a second look we realize that the story's heroine has achieved her survival within circumstances which are uniquely those of a woman within a man's world. Critics who complained that the film was "slow" through much of its first half missed the point. After she is torn out of her relationships by a car crash that kills her child and famous husband, this former wife and mother gradually remakes herself in a chosen solitude rendered solemnly and

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beautifully by Kieslowski and his actress, Juliette Binoche. When this woman is drawn reluctantly back into the world, it is by her passionate capability—she was composing much of her husband's music and is the only one who can finish an important new work, and she rediscovers an irrepressible urge for life in her sexuality.

The wonder of these two films is that they pursue an individual case, resisting old patterns and new pieties. Such films, of course, are exceptional. But, in the midst of change, men and women need exceptional stories, stories by filmmakers brave enough to start in uncertainty and reach by surprise toward their unforeseen measure of discovery.

Male gaze theory, with its focused political intentions, has made an excellent starting point for reflection and action, troubling men out of the crystalline jail of unexamined fantasy. But neither men nor women will be satisfied with a theory that cannot imagine a guiltlessly gazing man or an actively desiring woman. If the male gaze as defined by its theorists has cut away the individual, historical, and relational in its rendering of women, male gaze theory itself has cut away too much sexual reality and human possibility. It does not tell the whole story and it cannot give us everything we want. As with any fixed method of interpretation, it inevitably runs up against ruinous "misfit" facts. Confronted with the rich individuality and wild fecundity of the world and of human experience, it can only respond reductively. We need to learn to pick up our theories like the right tool for the job at hand, and to put them down when we turn to fresh tasks.

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JAMES W. TUTTLETON

Rehabilitating Victorian Values

I had not realized—until I read Gertrude Himmelfarb's *The De-Moralization of Society*[1]—how thoroughly Victorian my parents happened to be. Both were born at about the turn of the century and came to their majority in the twenties and so technically were children of . . . well, the Jazz Age. But Modern Times must have arrived later in the Midwestern farm community where they were born because, so far as values were concerned, they were (in Gertrude Himmelfarb's definition) perfect Victorians.

Ms. Himmelfarb, Distinguished Professor of History Emerita of the Graduate Center of CUNY, is well equipped to define Victorian values for contemporary readers. Aside from books on Darwin, Lord Acton and John Stuart Mill, she has also written widely about the such topics as *Victorian Minds* (1968), *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (1984), *Marriage and Morals Among the Victorians* (1986), *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians* (1991), and, most recently, *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society* (1994). In the present work she undertakes not only to define what the Victorians affirmed and celebrated as virtues but also to show what happened to those virtues as Time dragged Anglo-American society from Victorianism into Edwardianism, the Jazz Age, Modernism, and now even Postmodernism.

To be more precise, *The De-Moralization of Society* charts the loss of belief in those qualities that sustained the generation of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers—the value of self-discipline, the importance of self-help, the idea of work as in itself worthwhile (as even perhaps a redemptive factor in life), thrift, cleanliness, perseverance, honesty, personal responsibil-

[1] THE DE-MORALIZATION OF SOCIETY: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values, by *Gertrude Himmelfarb*. Alfred A. Knopf. $24.00.

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ity, personal philanthropy, and sexual purity. Professor Himmelfarb adduces a great deal of evidence to show that, at the height of the Victorian period, all sectors of society gave allegiance to these values as personally important and socially essential. But, more important, it was widely believed that these were not merely culture- and time-specific values but "perennial virtues" worth cultivating in any age or place.

Professor Himmelfarb does not think that they are perennial virtues since they differ from what ancient Greeks, say, would have defined as virtue (courage, magnanimity, etc.). But that they were essential for all seasons accounts, it seems to me, for why my parents held to them with the greatest tenacity. A culture does not move along from era to era like a circus wagon from town to town, bringing to each succeeding age a set of differing novelties and freak shows. In any culture with a historical memory there will be lines of continuity, a palimpsest of values, a set of value-overlays derived from the past and continually integrated with what is thought to be eternal. We unconsciously concede this when we call Jefferson a "Renaissance man," though he lived in the eighteenth century; Dr. Johnson an "Augustan" (of the Roman variety); and the Victorian Carlyle a contemporary of Abbott Samson at Bury St. Edmonds in the Middle Ages. At the turn of the twentieth century, Henry Adams in the *Education* called himself "a child of the eighteenth century" and there is no reason to doubt that he was. Some of us don't like very well the time and place fate dealt us and, like Professor Himmelfarb, are ready to concede that they managed things better back then.

I note, however, that Professor Himmelfarb has come under an especially violent attack in the press for showing that the Victorians, in both England and America, maintained the society in a more orderly way and in a better condition than we do. Her evidence—a terrifying thought to the Left—has proved persuasive to the politicians. In England, the rehabilitation of Victorian values has been an unashamed aspect of the political agenda of the Tories (who have turned out to be, however, so far as sexual rectitude is concerned, no better than they should be). Indeed, Professor Himmelfarb quotes an interview in which Margaret Thatcher expresses gratitude to the Victorian grandmother who had brought her up:

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> We were taught to work jolly hard. We were taught to prove yourself; we were taught self-reliance; we were taught to live within our income. You were taught that cleanliness is next to godliness. You were taught self-respect. You were taught always to give a hand to your neighbour. You were taught tremendous pride in your country. All of these things are Victorian values. They are also perennial values.

How quaint! was the reaction. It is particularly hard for the press corps and the political left to grasp the point that the set of values defined here by Lady Thatcher, defined as Victorian but paradoxically perennial, is a matter of devout conviction in the mainstream America that has elected a Republican congressional majority. Congressman Newt Gingrich is himself a Thatcherite, when it comes to values. He recently stupefied the Washington Press corps (which is at the head of the circus wagons) by adducing Professor Himmelfarb's new book as evidence that Americans, by emulating the Victorians, can turn around a society that has become worm-eaten with liberalism, licentiousness, and phony compassion. In "Gingrich Looks to Victorian Age to Cure Today's Social Failings" (in the *New York Times* for 14 March 1995), Katharine Q. Seelye reports that the Speaker of the House told the National League of Cities that the Victorians

> changed the whole momentum of their society. They didn't do it through a new bureaucracy. They did it by re-establishing values, by moral leadership, and by being willing to look at people in the face and say "You should be ashamed when you get drunk in public; you ought to be ashamed if you're a drug addict."

Did shame play a role in reducing Victorian out-of-wedlock births? Yes, according to the statistics provided by Professor Himmelfarb. Can shame work in America? Mr. Gingrich evidently thinks so: "Read Himmelfarb's book," he told reporters. "It isn't that complicated."

But the pressure of public opinion is more complicated than Mr. Gingrich suggests. Moral leadership is something that the Victorian period provided, more or less, from the top down. Queen Victoria brought to the throne a high standard of domestic purity and public rectitude, such that her name is given to a species of respectability that, since the days of Oscar

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Wilde, has been dismissed as repressive. Her long reign, which came close to spanning the whole century, reminded Englishmen that the monarch is, among other things, the spiritual leader of the nation. As Walter Bagehot remarked in *The English Constitution* (1867),

> We have come to regard the crown as the head of our *morality*. The virtues of Queen Victoria and the virtues of George III have sunk deep into the popular heart. We have come to believe that it is natural to have a virtuous sovereign. And that the domestic virtues are as likely to be found on thrones as they are eminent when there.

Something of that same residual feeling obtains in America—the sense that the President is or ought to be the spiritual leader of the nation. He is not only supposed to be above the fray of party politics; in the last analysis, he is supposed to be the embodiment of the moral ideals of the nation. For this reason, something very close to reverence has attached itself to the American presidency—to Washington, Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the martyred JFK. Every four years we put our trust in a candidate who, we hope, will be not just a temporary manager of a huge executive bureaucracy but "the head of our morality."

But how can the American president embody this exalted spiritual function when he is a confessed adulterer who exposes his marital problems on prime time TV and whose sexual improprieties are the joke of the tabloids and scandal of the courts? How could *anyone* embody this role when the media evidently have no other purpose in life than to catch presidents and politicians—like Wilbur Mills, Teddy Kennedy, and Gary Hart—*in flagrante delicto*? Even those we used to think above reproach—Thomas Jefferson, FDR, Kennedy—have been so flayed in the scandal sheets and on TV (often with good reason) that no respect, much less reverence, could conceivably be paid to them. When the ostensible moral leader is rotten, a harvest of public cynicism is the result. Nevertheless, Professor Himmelfarb believes that Victorian values deserve more than the dismissive scorn of those who despise Mrs. Grundy.

Amongst those who have attacked *The De-Moralization of Society* are a horde of academic neo-Marxists, swarming out of the American Historical Association, with a flurry of protests

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that come down to the bankrupt argument that the Victorians espoused the Gospel of Work and the idea of personal responsibility only in order to exact the maximum of labor from the exploited, crushed, and impoverished masses. The values of hard work, personal responsibility, thrift, sobriety, punctuality and the rest were supposedly promoted by the middle-class Victorian power structure simply in order to control the unruly mob and focus their labor on middle-class profits.

In fact, however, Professor Himmelfarb has provided a great deal of evidence to show that self-respect and earning the respect of other people was a very important element in the disadvantaged Victorian's view of himself. Those struggling to make it from poverty and homelessness into the ranks of the working poor, and the working poor themselves, often expressed the absolute importance of properly managing their own economic, personal, and social affairs. To suck on the welfare teat, to go on the public dole, was to many an indigent Victorian a shameful humiliation. In the poorest years of my childhood, in the midst of the worst times of the Depression, my parents would have died before taking a government handout. The poor have always understood, in a way that reformers have not, that (as Professor Himmelfarb puts it) welfare or " 'poor relief,' unlike charity, had a demoralizing effect upon the poor and a deleterious effect on the economy." The imposition of poor relief, as the century wore on, also had a deleterious effect on late Victorian personal philanthropy.

But perhaps most conspicuous is the fact that no welfare program, then or now, has ever succeeded in abolishing poverty. And indeed, the existing strings to welfare grants have even separated families and subverted the very idea of the family in the conventional sense. Lyndon Johnson inaugurated a host of Great Society programs in 1963 with the intention of completing the New Deal agenda of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. "The War on Poverty" was to put an end to American indigence at last. But four trillion of your tax dollars later, the poor we have with us still; crime in the underclass has shot up like a rocket; illegitimacy is a rampant national scandal; single-mother households sag under the poverty level; generations of kids have grown up on the dole; welfare fraud is pervasive; and

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there is a continuing national ulcer of frustration, resentment, and rancor.

The reason for all of this is very probably that to which Professor Himmelfarb points. While there will always be fluctuations in the economy and in unemployment levels, the situation of the poor cannot be understood without reference to "the larger context of Victorian values—of character, conduct, and the social ethos." Indeed, the Victorians may have been right all along in believing that poverty was not a "problem" that could be "solved." Certainly if we have learned anything at all since the days of LBJ, it is that the problems of the poor are not remedied by simply throwing money at them. Professor Himmelfarb remarks that "in de-moralizing social policy—divorcing it from any moral criteria, requirements, even expectations—we have demoralized, in the more familiar sense, both the individuals receiving relief and society as a whole." Perhaps she is right in suggesting that we ought to resume the Victorian discussion of social problems in terms of the moral conduct, family values, and personal "lifestyles" of those who make a claim upon social services.

The De-Moralization of Society is nothing if not timely in its discussion of Victorian feminism. I was surprised, from Professor Himmelfarb's account, at the wide range of responses, on the part of nineteenth-century English women, to issues that most concerned them: marriage, birth and child care, divorce, prostitution, education and jobs, and the suffrage. Some were in favor of education but not in favor of public work; some saw birth control as liberating while others thought it subversive to marriage and men's sense of sexual responsibility; some were for, some against, suffrage. Professor Himmelfarb's account of the issues and personalities in nineteenth-century feminism is too complex to summarize here. But it suggests that the movement tolerated a great deal more dissent and disagreement over aims and methods than is now—given the canons of political correctness—the case. In any event, I was most struck with the foresight of the wise Millicent Fawcett, who urged women not to purchase liberation at the expense of womanliness and the domestic virtues, arguing that "anything that loosened the bonds of marriage and family meant the 'immeasurable degradation of women.' " It was Fawcett's

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> concern for the feminine virtues—purity, propriety, and womanliness—that distinguished the Victorian suffragists from many (although not all) the Edwardian suffragettes. And it was the concern for the domestic virtues—family, marriage, children—that even more sharply distinguished the Victorian feminists from the "new women" of the *fin de siècle*. The Victorian feminists were not rebels; they were reformers. And they were *Victorian* reformers, committed to those values, including family values, that were so deeply ingrained in Victorian culture and society.

Professor Himmelfarb is thus an acute diagnostician of the present Anglo-American social mess, seen as the effect of a de-moralizing slide from Victorian ethical high-mindedness to the anything-is-permitted sleaze of contemporary life. Unfortunately, however, her account of the Victorian ethos has a number of serious deficiencies, and she has nothing really to give us by way of a modern solution to the contemporary problems she has so brilliantly diagnosed.

As to the deficiencies of the book, there is plenty of evidence that the Victorians were rarely as high-minded as she makes them seem or, indeed, as they wished to appear. Hence the fulminations of Carlyle against the industrial horrors of the age; Arnold's despair at *all* the social classes—the "barbarian" aristocrats, the "philistine" middle class, the sodden lower classes who wanted only their "gin, beer, and *fun*"; and Marx's call to revolution. She is right to point out, however, that at least the Victorians gave lip service to the idea of virtue and that, as La Rouchefoucauld observed, "hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue." Our age pays homage to virtually nothing, so far as I can see, beyond celebrity and money. In any case, what we need is the rehabilitation of a very selective cluster of ideas and moral principles that were voiced in the nineteenth century but that subsequently got lost.

However, when we look to Professor Himmelfarb to explain how we can recover them and overcome the current disconnection between social policies and the moral convictions that once served to effect and animate them, the deficiencies of her book become most visible. The difficulty is shown in the following passage from her conclusion:

> The main thing the Victorians can teach us is the importance of values—or, as they would have said, "virtues"—in our public as well

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as private lives. And not so much the specifically Victorian virtues that we may well value today, as the importance of an ethos that does not denigrate or so thoroughly relativize values as to make them ineffectual and meaningless.

Now, Victorian virtues and values were of course ethical formulations founded on Christian belief, church doctrine, and prescribed moral commandments. While Darwin, Huxley, and others sapped the confidence of Victorian believers, over a period of time, Professor Himmelfarb's gallery of Victorian moralists were frankly all nurtured on Christian doctrine. (And on the Jewish doctrine as well: Professor Himmelfarb's chapter "The Jew As Victorian" makes the excellent case that the values espoused by the Victorian moralists [some of whom were Jewish] were grounded in the Old Testament and Talmud as well.)

But Nietzsche was quite right in *The Twilight of the Idols* to remark that "when one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet." The same might be said for giving up orthodox Judaism. For quite some time a great many Americans have thought of this country as a "Christian nation" whose greatness lay in part in the social manifestation of its Christian moral values. But more than a century has elapsed since Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud began their work of transvaluing the values that underlay Anglo-American political and social assumptions. The moral capital of Christian faith has been mostly all spent now—and with it the basis for Christian (a.k.a. Victorian) morals. Nowadays, who believes in the supernatural doctrines of Christianity? Or the miracles of Judaism for that matter? And who can think of this country any longer as Christian? Or even Judeo-Christian?

The consequence of the bankruptcy of all religion now (except for the saving remnant) is that the public affairs of this nation—in government, in social services, in the media, in public education, etc.—are mainly run (and used by) what might be called the new immoralists. They have no beliefs or convictions, short of hedonistic pleasure and self-aggrandizement, and they have no capacity to understand the remnant who retain their faith, espouse an old-fashioned morality, and

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live in a different time warp. These are dismissed as moral cranks and crackpots, the religious right, killjoys, a dangerous threat to our open, inclusive, multicultural, and flaccidly tolerant society. Even so, something is horribly wrong with our society, and we are desperately ransacking the past—the Victorian era this time—for answers.

So, as we turn toward the new century, what are our social values, our moral virtues, to be grounded on? Professor Himmelfarb, alas, has no answer. She cannot call for the apostate Gentile's return to Christian doctrine; nor does she advocate the secular Jew's embrace of the abandoned Temple and the Torah. The moral order of the classical past has also seen its day. For her, it is likewise impermissible for government to promote any particular moral precepts. She does not even insist on the specific Victorian values that she has affirmed throughout this book. Instead, the country is supposed, somehow, to create an "ethos" that accords importance to "values" and does not denigrate "virtue." This, it seems to me, is a hopeless task. Without someone to give us the real book of virtues and the ground on which they can be believed and defended, the society will continue to wander about in the dark.

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BRUCE BAWER

God on the Bestseller List

Spiritually, 1990s America is in a paradoxical state. In no Western nation do more people attend church every week and profess belief in God, Heaven, and Hell; by numerical measures, we're a highly religious country. Yet numerical measures are a secular gauge. In fact, when it comes to spiritual matters, America is plagued by ignorance and confusion, insecurity and fear, emptiness and hunger. If this country has historically spawned more than its share of new religions, each with its own detailed, uniquely inerrant dogma, and if fundamentalist Christianity—with its fanatical (albeit selective) devotion to the brutally categorical codes of Leviticus and its literal understanding of Revelation—has won countless adherents, it is largely because Americans have always been a pragmatic people, ill at ease with supernatural ambiguities and abstractions and eager for clear-cut answers, explicit guidelines, and rigid edicts. We're a people with "vision," to be sure, but that vision has always centered on an "American dream" of objectively quantifiable success—a big suburban house, a three-car garage, a six-figure salary.

This native discomfort with mystery, of course, also manifests itself in a secular public culture that, as Stephen L. Carter notes in his carefully argued *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*, translates the legal concept of church-state separation into the notion that public society itself should be a religion-free zone.[1] Meanwhile, in *American Soul*, a wide-ranging, thought-provoking set of meditations on the national character, the historian and sociologist Franz Schurmann finds reason to applaud American materialism. Celebrating Americans as practical visionaries—as people who have always focused their metaphysical energies on the tangible world—Schurmann describes the emerging "one

[1] THE CULTURE OF DISBELIEF: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion, by *Stephen L. Carter*. Basic Books. $25.00.

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world" of American-style consumerism and pop culture as the triumphant product of this peculiarly American vision.[2] (Despite this seeming harmony between pragmatism and vision, Schurmann does recognize the hippie-versus-hardhat tumult of the 1960s as a confrontation between the two forces—between, that is, the materialism of workers who sought to join the middle class and the spiritual rebellion of privileged young people against their parents' materialism.)

The Culture of Disbelief and *American Soul* are only two of many books that mark the current "religion boom." Unsurprisingly, the most popular of these books tend to be mind-bogglingly vulgar and anti-intellectual. For instance, *Mary's Message to the World*, whose author, Annie Kirkwood, claims to be a channeler for the Mother of God, sold over two hundred thousand copies in 1994 alone. (One wishes that one could become a channeler for H.L. Mencken so that he might have the opportunity to dismiss such nonsense in the terms it deserves.) Also big in 1994 were life-after-death books—Betty Eadie's *Embraced by the Light* sold almost two million copies—and books on angels, with titles like *Angels: The Mysterious Messengers, An Angel to Watch Over Me, Where Angels Walk, In Search of Angels, Angels Among Us*, and *The Angels within Us*. Such books approach the numinous on a pop-culture level, invoking Hollywood images of extraterrestrial encounters and angelic guardians. (Talk about trivializing religious devotion!)

Some of the bestsellers straddle Christianity and the New Age. Among these is *Illuminata: Thoughts, Prayers, Rites of Passage* by Marianne Williamson.[3] A perusal of this volume—a prayer-book-sized grab bag of undemanding, generically spiritual, feel-good reflections, prayers, and services to commemorate puberty, marriage, divorce, and death—suggests that while Williamson may know God intimately, she is not well acquainted with the basic rules of English grammar. (One sentence begins: "Below are a list . . .") She seems, moreover, to be less interested in individual responsibility than in identity-group guilt. A prayer for "Amends between Men and Women" reads in part as follows:

[2] AMERICAN SOUL, by *Franz Schurmann*. Mercury House. $14.95p.
[3] ILLUMINATA: Thoughts, Prayers, Rites of Passage, by *Marianne Williamson*. Random House. $20.00.

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(*Men to women*)

If I or any other man has ever done anything to hurt you or offend you, and for the manifold transgressions against women, you and every other, I apologize.
Please forgive me and please forgive us.
If you have ever felt demeaned, uncherished, or your womanhood betrayed in any way;
If I or any other man has failed to see the light of your sex and the brilliance of your female spirit, on behalf of all of us, I am so sorry.
May the beauty of women and the power of women and the vision of women now burst forth in the world and in our consciousness.

One hesitates to criticize such stuff, because it sort of means well and to most readers will probably seem harmless enough. But the notion of group guilt and victimization that underlies this book ultimately represents a threat to the notion of evil itself. The book's relentless inanity, meanwhile, seems designed to rid readers of any capacity for processing or germinating ideas—and thereby, presumably, to bring them Inner Purity. There's also a lot of unconscious condescension here. Williamson's prayer for white Americans to address to African-Americans includes the following lines: "Please forgive me and please forgive this country. . . . On behalf of my nation, I deeply apologize." *My* nation?

Also bestriding Christianity and the New Age is *Riding with the Lion: In Search of Mystical Christianity* by the Cypriot sociologist Kyriacos C. Markides.[4] The title is promising: the recovery of a truly Christian mysticism is an appealing prospect. But the book proves to be an intellectual jumble. Composed in an off-putting dialogue-heavy style, and structured loosely around the author's meandering adventures, it seeks to incorporate reincarnation into Christianity. There is little here of serious theological interest; Markides views the world's major religions not as complex, coherent systems of thought but as a sort of metaphysical salad bar at which hungry consumers are free to

[4] RIDING WITH THE LION: In Search of Mystical Christianity, by *Kyriacos C. Markides*. Viking. $24.95.

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pick and choose. For him as for Williamson, intellect seems not only unimportant but undesirable—it's something that must be turned off before you can have a true, pure mystical experience. Markides is enthralled by accounts of clairvoyance, ESP, levitation, apparitions, and other brands of magic without meaning. Yet what, one wonders, makes this mysticism specifically Christian?

If you subscribe to a gay magazine or donate money to an AIDS cause, you are likely to wind up on the mailing list for something called Shocking Gray, which sells all kinds of paraphernalia that gay men and women presumably cannot live without. *Queer Spirits: A Gay Men's Myth Book*, by Will Roscoe, is sort of a Shocking Gray catalogue of the spiritual.[5] "This collection," writes Roscoe (who is himself sort of a gay Robert Bly, a Lavender John), "was compiled to inspire, guide, and challenge gay men who are seeking a deeper understanding of their sexuality and identity. . . . It's time to ask ourselves, What does it all mean?"

To help answer this question, Roscoe proffers snippets of writings from various cultures that purportedly speak to gay people's thoughts about gay identity: a few paragraphs of a Flannery O'Connor story, a short Whitman poem, bits of the Mahabharata, Plato, Ovid, "Little Boy Blue," legends from China, India, and the Pacific islands, etc. There's plenty of Native American stuff (which is not surprising, given that Roscoe's previous books are about gay Indians). There are some illuminating things here: though I knew Hans Christian Andersen was homosexual, for example, it had never occurred to me that "The Ugly Duckling" was a parable about growing up gay.

But while taking note of homosexual elements in myths of all cultures is a worthwhile pursuit, and while an awareness of such myths can be inspiring and self-affirming for emotionally wounded gay men and women, centering one's spiritual life on group identity would ultimately seem to be missing the point. It's easy for gays who have been despised and rejected by heterosexual church folk to identify with other gays and to seek out a purely gay spirituality; but a spiritual life that doesn't

[5] QUEER SPIRITS: A Gay Men's Myth Book, by *Will Roscoe*. Beacon Press. $24.00.

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challenge people to identify with and reach out to those who are different from them, and who may even hate them, seems to me inadequate, whether the people in question are gays or Pat Robertson's "700 Club" loyalists. It's also troubling that Roscoe, while seeking to present gay readers with stories and characters they can identify with, clings maddeningly to the word "queer" and to the narrow set of ideas it implies. But then *Queer Spirits*—in which the introductions to individual pieces are routinely autobiographical and often longer than the pieces themselves—is a highly personal work, best understood, perhaps, as Roscoe's commonplace book.

One of the founding fathers of the current era of spiritual self-help is the physician and psychologist M. Scott Peck, whose 1978 book *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* is still on the *New York Times* bestseller list.[6] At first blush Peck seems anti-religious, stating that one patient's Catholic faith was "badly suited to her needs" and that the Church had "made not the slightest effort to assist her in working out a more appropriate and original personal religion." (Surprise!) In this case, Peck says, his role as therapist was "to actively challenge her religious ideas in order to bring about change in the direction of a dramatically diminished influence of the God-concept in her life."

Yet Peck does not oppose religion; he believes in the miraculous (not in Markides' tawdry-spectacle sense, but in the sense of grace touching lives in subtle and meaningful ways) and integrates psychoanalysis and spirituality in what seems to me a valid and admirable manner. He tells a lovely story about a patient who needed to work through certain parentally induced difficulties in order to acknowledge to himself and others his faith in God and his desire to be a minister. In saying, then, that "belief in God is often destructively dogmatic," a psychopathology that needs to be addressed and overcome, Peck is disapproving not of belief but of dogmatism. He is perceptive about the harmful and essentially neurotic nature of many an unquestioning "hand-me-down" faith clung to from childhood, as well as about the positive value of a thinking faith grown into

[6] THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth, by *M. Scott Peck*. Touchstone/Simon & Schuster. $12.00p.

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out of atheism or agnosticism. He affirms the value of spiritual growth and speaks of the possible "unification of religion and science" as "the most significant and exciting happening in our intellectual life today." He could be categorized as a New Ager, but his emphasis is on spirituality not as vapid lifestyle enhancement but as a profound intellectual challenge that demands responsibility and maturity and entails struggle and suffering. This distinguishes him from most New Agers, who tend to offer easy short cuts to perfect peace and enlightenment, and to mix elements of different religious systems willy-nilly.

Like Peck, Thomas Moore is a therapist who writes sensibly about relationships and honors the spiritual element in them. *Care of the Soul* is a bestseller; he calls his follow-up book, *Soul Mates: Honoring the Mysteries of Love and Relationship*, "a manual for fostering many kinds of soulful relationships, first by becoming aware of the nature of the soul, and especially its role in intimacy, and then by discovering concrete ways in which such relationships can be tended."[7] A former Catholic monk, Moore quite properly views Jesus' commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" as foundational. He affirms the connectedness of all people and the spirituality of all experience; in part, his book is about the struggle to experience the world spiritually as a community—which is, after all, at the heart of the meaning of Christianity. "We live in a society," he writes,

> that prides itself on secularizing the most awe-inspiring aspects of life. We have made birth primarily a medical experience, and we see sex as the expression of personal feelings. The family has become a social organization and parenthood a skill for which one can be effectively trained. These pragmatic approaches to the family do not do much for its soul; because while the soul is always fully involved in the day-to-day concerns of life, it also always has an eternal dimension that demands equal attention and care.

Apropos of family life, Moore cites a Catholic prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, who was subject to Joseph and Mary, you have consecrated domestic life with unspeakable power. Teach us by the example of your Holy Family and with the help of each member, and help us live in eternal community." Huh? Jesus

[7] SOUL MATES: Honoring the Mysteries of Love and Relationship, by *Thomas Moore*. HarperPerennial. $13.50p.

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was no family man; he left his parents and lived in a community of unrelated men and women, offering a lesson not in complacent domesticity but in overturning traditional notions of family. In any event, Moore adverts less often to such Christian models than to Jung and the classic Greek myths, which he probes for illuminating archetypes. At one point he distinguishes between "care of the soul" and psychoanalysis by saying that "the former offers a profound appreciation for the personalities who are important in our lives, even if they are flawed people and even if the relationship is not perfect," while "psychology prefers to analyze with the goal of increased understanding, yet understanding does little for the soul. Imagine telling stories of the dead, not for insight into ourselves, but simply to establish a deep, continuing relationship with them. The soul is given eternity in that exchange, while understanding offers it little more than another fragment of logic that has nothing to do with establishing a home for the infinite within our finite lives." To which one can only reply: why must it be one or the other? Why should understanding other people preclude a spiritual bond with them? Doesn't understanding enhance rather than impede connection?

If both Peck and Moore prompt such objections on a regular basis, both also have much to say about relationships and spirituality that makes sense, and much that might be dismissed as little more than good old common sense. Yet common sense is certainly preferable to the arrant nonsense of Williamson, Markides, and company.

At the beginning of *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, an Italian journalist named Vittorio Messori explains that some time back he submitted a list of questions to the Pope in anticipation of a planned television interview.[8] The interview never materialized, but the Pope, according to Messori, found the questions "interesting" and scribbled out answers. The result is this strange hodgepodge, in which each short chapter begins with one of Messori's queries.

Reviewers have remarked upon the book's supposed difficulty. In fact it's very basic stuff, thoroughly understandable by any educated reader; though now and then the Pope drops the

[8] CROSSING THE THRESHOLD OF HOPE, by *Pope John Paul II*. Knopf. $20.00.

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name of a philosopher or theologian with whom the reader may not be familiar, this does not impede comprehension of his essential points. Far from being difficult, the book is surprisingly thin, unsystematic, incomplete, even (at times) incoherent and contradictory. Frequently, and often inexplicably, the Pope puts words, phrases, and entire sentences in italics.

Illustrative of this book's messy presentation is a passage about fear and love. Fear of God, writes the Pope, is the origin of wisdom. He says this "filial fear" differs from "servile fear" but doesn't explain the difference. He then maintains that "*the authentic and full expression of this fear is Christ Himself.* Christ wants us to have fear of all that is an offense against God." So fear is good. Or is it? For the Pope then says that "Man is set free through love . . . [which] *drives out all fear.*" But then the Pope equates love and fear: "filial fear," he declares, "*is first of all love.*" Nevertheless he has taken as a sort of personal motto the injunction "Be not afraid!", which is written on the back of the book's dust jacket. Presumably all this makes sense to the Pope, but he has not made sense of it here.

This book reads like an interview with a politician. The Pope dodges questions, finesses answers. When asked if he has ever doubted God's existence, and again when asked to describe how he prays, he doesn't reply directly, and instead provides generalized discussions of doubt and prayer. Both he and his interviewer avoid controversial issues. The chapter entitled "Women" is barely a page long—and even at that length it feels padded, awkward, uncomfortable, as if the Pope is flailing about for something to say about the subject. In fact he has little to offer here except empty phrases about the need for "true respect for woman" and devotion to the Virgin Mary. The Pope doesn't mention women priests, and Messori, for his part, takes pains to avoid this delicate issue; when Messori refers to the rift between the Roman and Anglican churches, he speaks ambiguously of "certain decisions" by the Anglicans that caused it, but doesn't say that the "decisions" in question were actually a single decision to sanction female ordination.

Descartes comes up frequently, for the Pope sees Cartesian rationality as the foundation of twentieth-century secularism and thus the great enemy of Christianity and the root cause of many Catholics' departure from the Church. He doesn't ac-

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knowledge that many Catholics have left the Church not because they've been seduced by secularism but because the Vatican's inflexible stand on many issues has made them feel obliged to choose between remaining in the Church and being true to their consciences and the testimony of their senses. Under the present Pope, the Church has been particularly abominable in its treatment of gay Catholics who seek wholeness and of theologians whose honest searches for truth have led them to positions that don't conform rigorously enough to the Church's required laundry list of superstitions, sentimentalities, and prejudices. Neither Messori nor the Pope brings up these matters.

True, the Pope quotes (or at least mentions) philosophers and theologians in profusion, as if to imply that he respects free and vigorous philosophical and theological inquiry, but his answer to questions, qualms, and reservations is routinely to insist on the letter of Catholic dogma. "This is what we believe": case closed. The whole tone of the book, indeed, is antithought. Paths of reflection that lead away from absolute orthodoxy must be closed off, and wayward thinkers brought strictly back to the True Path—or, if they resist, must be ejected. When asked questions that imply doubt about this or that doctrine, the Pope responds like a severe professor rather than a loving pastor. Why, Messori inquires, doesn't God reveal himself more clearly? Wouldn't it be simpler if He made his existence more obvious? "The questions you ask," replies the Pope, "do not refer to Saint Thomas or to Augustine. . . . It seems to me that they stem from another source . . . the history of which begins with Descartes." When Messori asks, "Do heaven, purgatory, and hell still exist?" the Pope retorts: "Please open the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, to chapter 7, which discusses the eschatological character of the pilgrim Church on earth, as well as the union of the earthly Church with the Church in heaven." Whew! This book is presumably intended, in large part, for confused laity—but if a confused layman walked into a church and started asking questions, would the Pope really want a priest to respond in this way to his cries of the soul?

For many Christians, faith and reason go hand in hand: in Anglican theology, for instance, reason is a pillar of belief. Not

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for this Pope. For him, belief is a matter of radical irrationality, of pure will; every Catholic must affirm that angels are real, that the children in Fátima really saw the Virgin. The Pope even posits that the assassination attempt on him took place on the anniversary of the first apparition at Fátima because Christ was trying to tell us something. I find this notion monstrous.

The most disturbing thing about this book, however, is that the Pope says little about love. When he does refer to it, he seems to feel a pressing need to turn it into something else—fear, suffering, punishment. For many Christians, the heart of Christianity is the gospels, and the heart of the gospels is love. For this Pope, by contrast, the heart of the gospels is pain, persecution, agony. "If the agony on the Cross had not happened," he writes, "the truth that God is Love would have been unfounded." Yes, the sacrifice on the Cross is crucial to Christianity. But why does the Pope say nothing here about Jesus' life, his ministry, his living example of unjudging love? If this book is any indication, all that matters to the Pope about Jesus, ultimately, is his Crucifixion agony. To be sure, the supreme gospel message to love God and your neighbor isn't entirely absent from this book, but it seems alarmingly far from the center of the Pope's thought.

The English novelist Susan Howatch knows better than the Pope does what Christianity is and isn't about. It isn't about fetishism in regard to suffering; as Charles Ashworth, the Anglican bishop of Starbridge, puts it in Howatch's novel *Absolute Truths*, "Christianity's about effort—about expending blood, sweat and tears to be what you've been designed by God to be and do what you've been designed by God to do . . . it's love that matters, it's love that's at the heart of Christianity, it's love that's the absolute truth of all absolute truths, not fear, repression and self-hatred."[9]

I've criticized Howatch in the past for her overly sensational plots and her gratuitous interjection of absurd superstitious elements (her previous novel featured teleportation; *Absolute Truths* includes an exorcism), but this novel, like the five previous entries in her High Church series, also evinces a mature understanding of the meaning of Christianity, as well as

[9] ABSOLUTE TRUTHS, by *Susan Howatch*. Knopf. $25.00.

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an admirable ability to sympathize with both the "liberal" and "conservative" wings of the Anglican Church and to recognize the Christian virtue inherent in these parties' willingness to work together, discuss their differences, and even learn from one another. Howatch is to be commended for her ability to churn out well-written novels that are first-class page-turners but that also encourage serious reflection about humanity's place in the universe and God's place in human lives.

The first novel in the High Church series was entitled *Glittering Images*, and indeed the entire series has been concerned with the danger, faced by all clerics, of getting trapped inside false images of priestly perfection that make it harder for them to admit their own frailties, doubts, and vulnerabilities, and thus to serve God and humankind to their best ability. The books might have been written expressly for the Pope to read. In this connection it is interesting to note that Charles Ashworth, on page 461 of *Absolute Truths*, describes in detail how he prays; it is an illuminating and helpful description that makes one wish that the Pope, in his book, had dared to step out from behind his "glittering image" and done something similar.

If you like unauthorized, warts-and-all biographies of celebrities by their former underlings, you'll love *God: A Biography* by ex-Jesuit Jack Miles, who offers a surprisingly fresh perspective on his sometime Boss.[10] Seriously, though we tend to think of God as being "from age to age the same," Miles, perusing in sequence the books of the Hebrew scriptures, effectively shows how the unaccountably harsh God of Genesis I becomes, in II Samuel, a "father" and "redeemer," in Isaiah becomes "unknowable," a bringer of "comfort," a Creator motivated by "love" for his children, and in Daniel is seen as a weary "Ancient of Days." Early in the Bible God frequently converses with man, but after the Book of Job, God never speaks again; morality, at first absent as a divine concern, increasingly becomes a key preoccupation. By the end of the Hebrew scriptures, God is almost absent. "The Lord God's life," writes Miles, "begins in activity and speech and ends in passitivity and silence."

Miles reads the Bible as being, above all, about the power struggle between God and man. There is much truth in this

[10] GOD: A Biography, by *Jack Miles*. Knopf. $27.50.

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view, although it leads him to readings of individual texts (such as the Sodom story) that are unconvincing and dramatically at odds with those of most modern commentators. It does not seem excessive to view this book as an act of rebellion by a former priest, an explosion of resentment at the power that God has had over him. (In this, of course, Miles has much in common with the authors of several of the psalms.) Indeed, by reducing God to the level of a literary character, this book is itself an audacious assertion of power over the deity.

Part of what makes this study fascinating is that Miles notices what God *doesn't* say or do. As he drives Adam and Eve from Eden, for example, God doesn't "instruct . . . them about what lay ahead," or explain "why he had to do what he did." What, Miles asks, does this tell us about God's nature and motives? Like any good Protestant fundamentalist, Miles gives every word of the Bible equal weight, saying for instance that "it is only by a forced political correctness that the bible as a whole can be read as neutral on the subject of homosexuality." Yet the argument proffered by gay Christians is not that the scriptures contain no passages condemning homosexual acts, but rather that believers must examine such passages in historical and textual context and in light of the gospel message. Granted, Miles is not writing as a Christian commentator but as a sort of literary critic whose approach resembles the neo-Aristotelian method of the so-called "Chicago critics," for whom every literary text is an integral and indivisible whole.

The problem with Miles's conceit, of course, is that what we observe when we read the Bible as he does here is not God's development as a character but the evolution of the Jews' understanding of him. As Miles observes, "A biography of God is not a true commentary on the Bible." But this learned, gracefully written, and (I think) deeply spiritual inquiry constitutes a powerful, poignant, and provocative supplement to traditional commentaries.

Provocative is also the word for a number of recent works by serious theologians. In his brief *Credo,* Hans Küng—the great Swiss scholar and adviser to the Second Vatican Council whose repudiation of papal infallibility lost him his official Church credentials—reads through the Apostles' Creed, brilliantly freeing it line by line from the literalistic interpretations that

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make many thinking Christians feel that they cannot recite it in good faith.[11] In *Putting Away Childish Things*, Küng's German colleague Uta Ranke-Heinemann (whom the Church declared ineligible to teach theology after she denied the truth of the virgin birth) charges through the New Testament with a machete, slashing away at Luke's Christmas story, Jesus' genealogies, and other "fairy tales" that modern Biblical scholarship has shown to be inconsistent with the historical record, with logic, with scientific fact, or with other scriptural passages.[12] Ranke-Heinemann is not only a truth-seeker but a moral crusader, blunt in her assertion of the inhumanity of many Christian doctrines, and particularly in her condemnation of John Paul II's exaltation of pain, suffering, and virginity; her book constitutes an admirable attempt to clear away the weeds of irrelevance and superstition and to allow the flower of faith to bloom. But as one reads on, and as Ranke-Heinemann (a veritable Camille Paglia of theology) continues to slash away at holy writ, one begins to wonder what's left. What *does* she believe? Finally she answers the question—in one page. After a whole book full of slicing and dicing, one would have wished she had devoted more space to explaining what is left of Christianity when you clear away the "fairy tales."

Thankfully, that positive element is supplied by John Shelby Spong, the controversial Episcopal bishop of Newark, in *Resurrection: Myth or Fact?*[13] In this profoundly pastoral work, Spong focuses on the Easter narratives, which he refuses to literalize. Noting the multitudinous contradictions among the gospels in regard to the Crucifixion and Resurrection, he effectively argues that the gospels were written in the Jewish "Midrash" tradition, in which the literal truth prized by Christian fundamentalists is irrelevant, the goal being rather to find earthly words that will successfully convey the essence of a spiritual experience. In the Midrash tradition, writers build on the work of their predecessors, adding details, characters, and miraculous elements, derived from Hebrew scripture.

[11] CREDO, by *Hans Küng*. Doubleday. $20.00.

[12] PUTTING AWAY CHILDISH THINGS: The Virgin Birth, the Empty Tomb, and Other Fairy Tales You Don't Need to Believe to Have a Living Faith, by *Uta Ranke-Heinemann*. HarperCollins. $24.00.

[13] RESURRECTION: Myth or Fact?, by *The Rt. Rev. John Shelby Spong*. HarperCollins. $11.00p.

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While denying that Jesus' physical body returned to life on Easter, Spong affirms that something of unexampled "power and meaning" happened to the disciples after Jesus' death, something that caused these firm monotheists to declare a dead man their risen Lord. "There remains," Spong writes, "a powerful witness to a certain reality that was proclaimed with peculiar intensity: 'Death cannot contain him, we have seen the Lord.' " Spong concludes from this that

> we can reject the literal narratives about the resurrection and still not reject the truth and power of the resurrection event itself. . . . We would not have the legends unless there had been a moment so indescribable that legends became necessary to explain it. We would not have an Easter tradition unless there had been an experience so real that earthbound words could not capture it. Easter points us to a dimension of life that became so visible that ecstatic silence was originally the only appropriate response.

Readers who find themselves in accord with Spong up to this point may be less than completely satisfied with his speculations about what "really" happened after Jesus' death and about what it tells us about our own lives and deaths. Yet this reader, for one, came away from Spong's book spiritually nourished and in strong agreement with its chief points: that to "live in Christ" is more a matter of responding to the lesson of Jesus' life and ministry than of clinging to this or that literal scenario of his physical revivification; that the more fully one "lives in Christ," the less concern one has for one's individual fate after death; that Christianity is not about making deals with God for eternal salvation but about struggling to overcome self-concern. There's a lesson here for many New Agers, and perhaps even, I daresay, for the Vicar of Christ himself.

Part of Spong's argument is that Christian leaders won't be able to fill churches in a generation or two unless they scuttle elements that offend reason and charity. On the contrary, a faith stripped of superstition and prejudice is likely to be as popular—and this is especially true in the U.S.—as a TV network that features only educational programming. The unfortunate thing about *Homo sapiens*, alas, and in particular *Homo sapiens americanus*, is that vulgarity sells, whether we're talking about culture, politics, or religion. Just ask Betty Eadie.

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ROBERT McDOWELL

When Baseball Made Out

I want to be among the first to propose federal judge Sonia Sotomayer for the position of Commissioner of Baseball. This is such a good idea that given the owners and players who now disgrace the professional game we can be sure it will be utterly ignored. But even with the return of the regular major leaguers and the owners' latest stinging defeat, the game on the field seems very far away. In its absence another football season and Super Bowl came and went. Who ever thought it would come to this: spectators avid for the surprise and spectacle of a half-time show? But the Super Bowl has contributed just that to American culture. At the same time, basketball's non-season (before the real season of *its* play-offs begins) winds down, and hockey's abbreviated season (after its own strike) splutters along, an afterthought. But the true fan knows only that major league baseball ended early, capriciously, committed "suicide," one tabloid put it with the usual histrionics—and more than a little accuracy. No World Series—the first such deprivation since 1904—defined October 1994. Many of the game's enduring individual records, under serious assault in early August, passed intact into an off-season deprived of gentle argument and enthusiastic chatter about post-season exploits. Those accustomed to the comfort of radio baseball in spring and summer (in the words of pundit Charley McDowell, "part of the background music of America") turned off their sets and moved through lonelier landscapes. Some may have spent more time with family, but surely others crossed behavioral lines, acting out aggressive fantasies usually sublimated in the heat of a pennant race. Sadly, most of us just had less to talk about. We shunned dramatic outbursts, got on with it, and endured daily twinges of regret that no game would alter and soothe the pace of our hours. And, as is often the case when amusements—even serious ones—change or vanish, the longer the strike endured, the harder it was to care any more.

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Into this void, ironically, came Ken Burns's television documentary, "Baseball," speaking dearly to those who love the game but feel little affection for today's owners, players, and satellites (agents, the media) who make huge sums of money but crave ever more.[1] September 1994 hardly provided the optimum climate for such a debut. Often, reviewers who condemned the video epic really wanted to yell about the labor impasse that overshadows the game itself. Many complained that eighteen-plus hours was indulgent, too long, that Burns's "Baseball" gave us too much (and, therefore, not enough). But I cannot count myself among them. I—and, I suspect, people like me—never tire of grainy, black-and-white footage of Jackie Robinson's frenetic, hippity-hop lead off a base, or Mickey Mantle smiling into the camera, looking for all the world like Huck Finn in cleats, or the beautiful left-handed swing of Roger Maris before injuries robbed him of his power, or Willie Mays doing *anything*, anything at all. Who ever has enough of exuberance and perfection? Baseball images like these do not defeat Time; they polish Time, making perfect the moment. Who tires of remembering that? I can never see enough of Babe Ruth's sixtieth home run swing and mincing trot around the bases, or the lethal, coiling power of Sandy Koufax pitching. I never have my fill of Roy Campanella slugging and running out a home run at Ebbetts Field, or joyously frogging out to the mound to bear hug Johnnie Podres after game seven of the 1955 World Series. I never have my fill of it despite the pain in it, for we know that the great catcher is only two years away from the automobile accident that will confine him to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. A similar sadness pertains to the rare footage Burns resurrected to document the Negro Leagues, but there is surprise and joy in seeing it, too, in knowing that though so many great players were so cruelly excluded for so long, they are at last remembered, and honored. I am grateful for the footage of Ted Williams' final at bat, concluding a career of heroic interruptions, feuds, and excellence with the storybook home run, and of Joe DiMaggio hitting day after day after day in 1941. Having never seen The

[1] "Baseball: A Film," by *Ken Burns*. PBS & PBS Home Video. 9 tapes. $179.99 for the set. A companion volume has been published: BASEBALL: An Illustrated History, by *Geoffrey C. Ward* and *Ken Burns*. Alfred A. Knopf. $60.00.

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Big Train in action, I am fascinated by footage of Walter Johnson warming up, with his fluid, deceptively easy side-arm motion. I am grateful to Burns for these images, these moments, and the more I thought of them the more I realized that throughout the experience I responded to *parts* more than to a unified whole.

The Narrator

Some found Burns's decision to cast John Chancellor in this role an odd one. I dove into the series with no opinion. My generation got to know Chancellor as an earnest, efficient television newscaster who brought us down to mean Southern streets during some of the most intense confrontations of the Civil Rights Movement. His life seemed *dangerous*, for he talked as if he were almost out of breath, and he always seemed to be straining to see back over his shoulder as he looked into the camera. We feared the world he was standing in, and we wanted him to finish his report and get the hell out of there! We expected that at any moment a gang of white toughs would interrupt his segment with clubs and curses, or that he would suddenly panic, dropping the microphone and fleeing out of frame. Walter Cronkite looked and sounded like our grandfather. Chet Huntley and radio legend Edward R. Murrow flamed across fifties television and died too young. David Brinkley appeared to transform overnight from a glib, polished sophisticate to an ancient, crusty seer, a Yoda-like, weird conscience of TV journalism. But John Chancellor aged with us. Speaking to us in his sweat-drenched clothes, we could feel his fear and bravery. With Chancellor as guide on the issue of race relations, many of us began to develop a moral conscience. Ken Burns at forty-two is a member of this generation. Recall his fascination with Jackie Robinson, his assertion that his program lives to trumpet Robinson's coming, his impact on baseball and society. Remember that, and his selection of John Chancellor as his narrator makes perfect, poetic sense.

Beyond that, Chancellor also does a very good job. In fact, after we have survived yet another clanging version of the "Star Spangled Banner," which opens each episode, Chancellor's voice is essential balm as he reads from the strong script

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co-authored by Burns and Geoffrey Ward. Perhaps it is the PBS style (there were times I drifted, closed my eyes and thought I was listening to Bill Moyers), but Chancellor's tone conveys a high degree of sincerity, honesty. I was one viewer—and I am sure I was not alone—who came to feel he could have done with *more* Chancellor, especially as some of the witnesses began to wear on me.

The Witnesses

Witnesses perform the function of a bridge. They complete the connection between us, the observers, and the obscure footage we lean towards but aren't quite sure we can join. William Butler Yeats, speaking of his poet-peers, once said "There are too many of us," and that is also true of the witnesses in "Baseball." Buck O'Neil, as noted by others, stands out most memorably among them (Burns has called him the soul of the project). His eyes twinkle, and they seem to say to us, "I know so many secrets of life, and life is wonderful!" Generous, wise, and warm, O'Neil possesses one of those rare, Afterlife faces and voices you hope you'll meet in the end. His testimony is remarkable, too, for its lack of bitterness. Deprived, like his brothers, of the opportunity to play in the major leagues, O'Neil insists that he was not born too early and somehow missed out. His satisfaction with his life, and life's work, is thrilling, for it casts in high relief too many encounters with people who are unsure of their accomplishments and disappointed with the course they have followed. Though O'Neil suffered indignity aplenty (exclusion, patronizing employment by the Chicago Cubs), he will have none of it. Because it is in his nature, he shares with us the good news of living truthfully, even reminds us that we can live that way, too.

We also *hear* from some fine witnesses, though we do not see them. In the Series' first episode (or Inning, as Burns designates them), Hall of Famer Sam Crawford's affectionate reminiscence of barnstorming on the plains provides a firsthand glimpse, not at baseball alone, but also at a rural and mill town America many of us seldom experience. In Inning Three, Stanley Coveleski captures the difficulty of playing the game

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well: "Baseball's a worrying thing." In this Inning we also begin to hear excerpts from the diary of the fine Red Sox player Harry Hooper. Hooper kept this diary to chronicle life on the road, and the excerpts read in "Baseball" suggest it is one of the gems of baseball literature. The testimony of these three speaks to us with the authority borne of firsthand experience, the inside story we yearn for but seldom hear. They come from the game's early cutthroat days when players found in the game an escape from the mines and poor farms of their fathers, and when fans understood the game and interacted with it in subtle ways that modern spectators clamoring for entertainment cannot imagine.

A few others contribute specific insights, but most arrive in the witness box like extended family on holidays and stay too long. Two in particular appear with deadening frequency. Surely Daniel Okrent, an editor, must be the worst witness by far. Loose with his facts (the move of the Dodgers and Giants from New York was the first time "in twenty or thirty years that people were reminded baseball was a business"—he forgets the move of the Braves from Boston to Milwaukee a few years earlier; or "Connie Mack began in baseball as not a very good player"), unfortunate in his comparisons (Fenway Park is likened to a Civil War battlefield, "a vale of tears"), Okrent is guilty of "Baseball"'s single most appalling moment, his politically correct (though adjectivally—*black*—unfortunate) condemnation of Ty Cobb ("The great black mark on the history of baseball . . . an embarrassment to baseball"). Really. The man with the highest batting average in the game's history? The man who defined the way the game was played in the Dead Ball Era? The man who still holds a slew of batting records though he retired some seventy years ago? Why would Okrent single out Cobb rather than the owners who conspired for decades to exclude African Americans from the game, or Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis who enforced the ban, or Cap Anson, the Hall of Fame player who started it all by refusing to allow his team to play a club with African Americans on its roster? Embarrassments? These seem to me to be much more appropriate candidates than the personally flawed but professionally superb Cobb. Okrent's blunder must call into question his judgement, and therefore his qualifications for being called

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on at all. His generally condescending attitude is a downer, a cloud that compromises the programs in which he appears. Only once, when in a late Inning he dismisses the asterisk attached for years to the home run record of Roger Maris, does he get it right. . . . Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin also stays longer than she should. While she was a child growing up on Long Island, the Brooklyn Dodgers and Ebbetts Field had a lot to do with creating a deep bond between Goodwin and her father, and she is at her best describing that experience. But in the context of "Baseball," she has offered all she has to say by the time the Dodgers leave Brooklyn.

The Innings

In a documentary running more than eighteen hours, uneven moments are inevitable. Some of the Innings, especially the first two, are as tightly constructed as a John Ford film classic. In the middle Innings the coming of Babe Ruth, and later Jackie Robinson, rejuvenate this epic. The Ruth episode is especially welcome because it both thrives on and delivers up for us the larger-than-life energy that Ruth brought to the game and his times. He was the quintessential American Bad Boy who made good, and he resurrected the game as he followed his path.

But for Burns and for many viewers, the fact of baseball's long exclusion of African Americans seriously shapes perception and interpretation. Early in the Inning that focuses on the Negro Leagues Mario Cuomo comments: "In moments of crisis we understand community. We talk about it in this country, but we're not good at it. . . . The bunt play, sacrificing for the good of the whole . . . that's Jeremiah. That's thousands of years of wisdom." That perfectly frames the long struggle of the players in the Negro Leagues before the major league game opened up again in 1947. The sadness of this episode cannot be softened, for it exposes our collective fear and meanness, and our shame.

Other Innings *are* too long, cluttered with too many witnesses and not enough footage or good stories about the men who played the game so well. Still, there are high moments as in the Inning covering the World War II years; this is the time of DiMaggio's streak and Williams hitting .406, of the All-

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American Girls Baseball League and the death of Judge Landis. It is also the period in baseball when the players became more sophisticated and the fans grew more distant, less knowledgeable. The Innings devoted to the fifties (New York baseball) and sixties (Sandy Koufax) offer worthwhile moments, but in the latter episode, especially, filler begins to overwhelm substance. In one Inning no fewer than nine witnesses, seated in various locations and facing the camera, succumb to the ill-conceived request that they offer viewers their personal a cappella renditions of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." If you've seen it, you know it's tedious. Surprisingly, there is also a certain laxness in the use of live-action footage (as in one case involving "Curt Flood," who wore his glove on his left hand and threw right, making a catch with the glove on his *right* hand). George Weigel (in *Commentary*) and others have pointed out inaccuracies in "Baseball" regarding the accurate identification of the photographs and scenes we are watching. In earlier Innings Burns and his staff do commit some unfortunate errors. But I accept that some old photo documentation may not be very clear to begin with. What bothers me more is the fact that, in later Innings, we begin to see a lot of the same shots over and over again. It is almost as if the very availability of live-action footage has subtly sabotaged Burns's standards. "Baseball" 's last two Innings, examining the game in the seventies and eighties, suffer most.

What is it about them that does not satisfy, that often makes revisiting those years feel like a bad dream? The uniforms were hideous. The new cookie-cutter stadiums and artificial turf robbed the game of vital aspects of its quirky personality. Expansion diluted the quality of the game. Ticket and concessions prices rose steadily, making it ever more difficult for a family to enjoy a ball game in person, and television took over the game, eliminating double-headers and World Series games in the afternoon, extending the time it took to play a normal game (for commercials must air, sponsors must be served), and doing much to inflate salaries and other costs passed on to the fan. Even the low-grade video and film stock on which the games were preserved has washed out and faded, wearing less effectively than the grainy black-and-white footage chronicling earlier decades.

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But something else was happening, too. There was a new kind of pressure on the game itself, pressure to change its personality, pressure to reflect, somehow, the country's identity crisis. We can see more clearly now that the personality of the individual has been under increasing pressure to conform, to shed individuality. The process has been so unrelenting, so successful, that many today are more comfortable identifying themselves not as individuals with unique accomplishments and personality traits, but as members of this or that correct group. Unfortunately, *groups* usually lack the spark, originality, and individuality that are necessary to the creation of vital communities. By the sixties we had forced on the game a reflection of our collective self-consciousness; the reflection was a grotesque one, resembling what one sees in fun house mirrors.

T. S. Eliot once wrote that only those with personality know how important it is to escape from it. Isn't that one reason we *play* games? Hasn't baseball always invited us to slip into its own personality, so mysterious yet familiar? When the game is over we return to our lives glad to have been away for a few blessed hours. And if we choose, we can summon up an added gift—the shared memory of the things we witnessed *at* the game, the deeds that transported us *into* the game. In baseball we can make the sweet connection between our own experience and that of our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents. Baseball's personality creates a bridge between generations. As James Earl Jones's character declares at the end of the movie *Field of Dreams*, baseball reminds us "of all that was good, and will be again."

The Eastern Bias

For Ken Burns what is really good in baseball almost always takes place in the Northeastern corridor. In this bias he probably cannot help himself. After all, Burns hails from New Hampshire where the sun rises and sets on the fortunes of the Boston Red Sox. Beginning with the sale in 1919 of Babe Ruth to the Yankees, Burns appears to be almost fixated on the corridor rivalry between the Red Sox and Yankees. The ebb and flow of battle between teams *does* do much to define the

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nature of modern baseball rivalry as we understand it, but Burns may actually create in the casual viewer the impression that major league baseball has always consisted of two tiers: the Yankees and Red Sox in the top tier, and all the other teams in the second tier. The farther we move west of the eastern corridor in "Baseball," the less time Burns takes to tell the histories and fortunes of resident ball clubs.

The Dodgers, for instance, are really two teams in Burns's mind: in one incarnation, the clownish Daffiness Dodgers, later the noble Boys of Summer; in the other, the cold, remote, corporate giants, the Los Angeles Dodgers. It is an old story. Yes, the Dodgers moved west for one reason—to make more money, a lot more—and yes, it was a civic tragedy that the club ever left Brooklyn. And yet, and yet. I grew up in Los Angeles in the late fifties and sixties. I grew up very much aware of the Brooklyn soul of the club. In the team's first years on the West Coast most of the players were Ebbetts Field regulars. Johnny Podres, Jim Gilliam, Duke Snider, and Gil Hodges played a few seasons in L.A., and Pee Wee Reese and the great though underrated Carl Furillo finished their careers there. Don Drysdale and Sandy Koufax (who along with Maury Wills became the first Los Angeles baseball superstars) had played in Brooklyn; Koufax and Tommy Davis were even Brooklyn natives. Many of the team's rabid new fans understood and honored the Dodgers' Brooklyn roots. But if the club had not moved west, many of us might have grown up with no major league baseball to follow. I cannot imagine my childhood suddenly lacking the twin literary influences of Vin Scully, the sports commentator, and Jim Murray, the Hall of Fame columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*. I wonder if I would have grown up to write poetry at all if I had been deprived of listening to the wise, wry, poetic Scully on the radio every day. Of course, it would have been best if the Dodgers had remained in Brooklyn while Los Angeles received a new expansion team, but that didn't happen. And now the Dodgers have a remarkable franchise history in Southern California of thirty-six years and counting. But in watching "Baseball" you hardly realize it. For Burns, and for many other easterners, Walter O'Malley's betrayal of the borough of Brooklyn might as well have happened yesterday. There is no forgiveness. O'Malley is

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damned, and the Dodgers are worthy of our admiration only for the organization's corporate efficiency. And yet.

My brother took me to my first major league game in August 1961. I was eight years old. Our sun-drenched Coliseum seats were on the first base side and down the line. My memory is sketchy as to certain details, but I recall that Johnny Podres was pitching for us (*us* . . . the Dodgers), and that our team mauled the Cubs by a score of something like 11 to 1. I remember, too, that the man who was just beginning to change the way the game was played with his stolen bases, Maury Wills, uncharacteristically stroked his first major league home run. I remember the public address announcer calling our attention to that fact as Wills circled the bases, and the swelling of appreciative applause that covered and gathered us up. A warm and fuzzy recollection? You bet! Baseball is wonderful that way in its tolerance and promise, in its assurance that if we get with it, give in to it, the game will open us to our vulnerability, our humanity. My memories of that summer afternoon nearly thirty-five years ago consist of much more than a Baseball Moment (though I would not trivialize that aspect of the experience). That game provides one of my earliest, fondest memories of my brother; it also gave me my first memory of being a very small part of a large crowd more or less united in good cheer and intention. Perhaps it was my first model of a community at recreation, and it was not a great stretch, even for an unremarkable eight-year-old, to imagine that community just as effectively at work. From that day on, I have been a Dodgers fan for life. Though the team, and especially management, have often tested my loyalty, I remain true. When I lived less than two hours from Candlestick Park for nine years, I never became a Giants' fan. When I attended Columbia University and lived in Manhattan, I shunned the Yankees and Mets, tracking the fortunes of the Dodgers from afar. And now, after living for the last six years on an Oregon farm, I cannot get excited about the Seattle Mariners. Ken Griffey, Jr., is fabulous, yes, but to my mind he would be even more compelling dressed in Dodger Blue. Though the reception is better coming from Seattle, I still fiddle with my radio, attempting to pick up Vin Scully's voice through a station in Las Vegas. My point is this: Baseball teaches us to honor our earliest

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loyalties and affiliations. Some fans have always known this, even in the West.

Baseball Post-Strike

It is sometimes hard to be optimistic about baseball. We are hearing a lot about the game's fading place in American life and culture. We have heard it all before, like backwash accompanying the oceanic movement of the game. We could hear it at the turn of this century during the first player revolts; we heard it when the gambling scandals of the teens and twenties were exposed; we heard it when the reserve clause was abolished, when strikes and lockouts began to be periodically imposed; and we hear it today. The owners have emasculated the commissioner's office and are bent on recovering their former dominance over the game. But even they, like their predecessors, will eventually die or leave the game (Quick! Who owned the Indians in 1922? The Giants in 1936? The Cards in 1940?). Today's big league players will also grow old. Their skills will fade, and they will pass into history. After that, some manifestation of major league baseball will surely be with us. But even more important than that, the playing field, the bat, ball, and glove will survive. So, too, will players of all skill levels, all over the world, and so will the desire to play. So, despite its flaws, "Baseball" has come to us at a very good time. In addition to paying all necessary attention to the history of the major leagues, it also attempts to document the life of the game at all age levels and in all communities great and small. It gazes with us, both at the game's past, and ahead to its future. And as is so often true in baseball (and as I can attest from personal experience), the game's past and future often look like quite the same thing.

Two years ago—two seasons ago—a friend and I worked up our courage to see if we might be able to sign on with a team in the Oregon Men's Senior Baseball League. We dug out the yellowing newspaper clipping about the league I had saved the year before, and after several tries we hooked up with the Yankees, that year's new club. After one meeting at the batting cages, after paying $250.00 (for dues, fees, uniform), we

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became the last two players signed for the 1993 season. Players' ages ranged from thirty to sixty-plus; some were ex-minor leaguers, and some had skills commensurate with those of accomplished semi-pro players. Most were like us: They loved the game, had played once, and wanted to see if they could do it again. For Joseph, my partner in this happy madness, it had been ten years since, as an exchange student, he had found himself in the unlikely position of playing in Europe for the national team of Finland; for me, twenty-five years gaped between this effort and my last pony league season in Southern California.

In life we often imagine experience that has precious little to do with reality. Early on, this was the case with regard to our baseball comeback. Coming onto the team late, we rode the bench through the early pre-season games, only gradually getting the chance to hit once or twice during the course of a double-header. As late inning replacements we were tried first in the outfield where balls sailed over our heads and divots appeared as if by magic to send us hurtling through the air like two of the Three Stooges working a banana boat. Rust literally showered the field where we walked and ran. Some friends had kindly assured us that picking up the game again would be like riding a bike. They were wrong. Riding a bike does not involve hitting the fastball, curve, knuckle ball, or slider. We were still pretty good bike riders, but often in the early stages of our comeback it looked as if our cobwebbed baseball résumés were lies. We looked as if we had never played the game.

Then something happened. Through practice, through repetition, shadows of the old skills emerged. We began to field balls smashed in our direction, and at the plate we began to hit. Finally, we sufficiently gained our manager's confidence so that he started Joseph in the outfield. Our first baseman was also our best pitcher, so he inevitably started one of the two games we played every Sunday, and when he did I became the starter at first base, and DH'd when he played the bag in the other game (all debates aside, the designated hitter is a dream made for senior baseball leagues). By season's end Joseph and I had done well. Arguably, we had even distinguished ourselves, winding up among the better hitters on a club that went 10-10 in the regular season, 3-2 in the play-offs.

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After the season, several writers we knew and worked with asked us to start up our own team (which, of course, would include them). We knew we would begin as underdogs, so we agreed to embrace and adopt the Dodgers of an earlier era (besides, we loved the uniforms). Thus, the Brownsville-Brooklyn Dodgers was born. Because half our roster was made up of poets and fiction writers, we soon discovered that we had built in a unique press angle. Several state and local newspapers published columns about us, culminating in a major article by Ron Bellamy, "The Poets of Summer," which appeared in a Sunday edition of the Eugene *Register Guard*. It was a wonderful piece, and contained perhaps the best baseball quote ever. Robert Hill Long, a poet and contributor to this magazine, had this to say about the experience of playing hardball for the first time since the sixth grade: "Where else do you come to batting practice and somebody says, 'Hey, great poems in *The Hudson Review*!'" The Brownsville-Brooklyn Dodgers led the league in press coverage—and little else. I should qualify that statement. We did lead the league in several categories—in runs allowed, in errors, in fewest runs scored, and in highest team earned run average. We ourselves only averaged two runs and five hits per game, and we struck out, on average, twelve times per outing (a statistic that becomes even more frightening when you consider that we played seven inning games). These are not the numbers of an offensive juggernaut, and not surprisingly we finished the campaign with a perfect 0-16 record. We lost in ways probably never seen before in the game's long history. We could not hit, and we could not pitch. We were weak in the field and slow afoot. Our record for futility may never be equalled. We concluded our season tired, discouraged, beat up. But within a month we felt restored, taking aim on the season to come. That is the beauty of the game. No matter how good or bad you are today, there is always tomorrow where everybody starts even—nervous, full of hope, undefeated. If only we felt that way every morning of our lives! Our experience in the Oregon Men's Senior Baseball League, like Ken Burns's "Baseball," embraces the wish that is central to the game itself: That day after day, through the long seasons, we will rise to occasions, perform to perfection, and be worthy of remembrance. Baseball's rituals are the rituals of life itself. Whether the game began in our

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teeming immigrant cities or on our arid plains is immaterial. That Abner Doubleday did not invent the game matters not at all. Baseball's character embodies our flawed, profane, cruel, ever hopeful melting pot American history. This is what matters. This is why we play and follow the game. This is why we pass it on to our children, and why we continue to be fascinated by its poetry.

In my most optimistic moments, I imagine one wonderful result of the great strike of 1994–1995. I think of my experience with the Brownsville-Brooklyn Dodgers and am reminded that more than a million players are now involved in national senior baseball leagues (and yes, a national women's league is forming this year), and I imagine a resurgence of true amateur baseball. Unlikely? The desire to play and witness the game is strong. For the true fan, turning to another sport will not satisfy. Long ago, when every factory and community center sponsored teams, when baseball actively served the purpose of promoting communication, commerce, and competition among communities, it's possible that we better understood ourselves and our neighbors. So wouldn't it be ironic if the current major league moguls and players, in placing their own selfish interests ahead of the good of the game and its fans, inadvertently performed the greatest service in their power: Giving the game, and the *playing* of the game, back to people everywhere. Unlikely? Perhaps. Some would argue that at least two American generations have already been born to deadening spectatorship. Even in this information age of self-help programs and time management (aggressively promoted by carnies who now work out of office buildings rather than from the backs of wagons), we are more passive than ever. Afraid, intolerant of our neighbors, we bunker into our communities in nervous, grudging isolation, seeking escape and small comfort through televised viewing of professionals playing the games we loved to play as children. But baseball is all about community interaction, and there is much evidence to support the view that the game's best effects are felt on the local level. It is a dream—a wholesale resurgence of amateur ball—but it is lovely, and dreams are what baseball is made of.

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ROBERT BLY

A Family Picture

One Sunday morning in 1940, the group
Gathers on the farm lawn, ten people, all ages.
One boy smiles, and looks down. He seems content,
But his arm is too long, or the sweater sleeve too short.
The hands all look as if they wanted to grasp something.
Esther Berg's hair moves in washboard waves;
The women look as if they have too much to do.
The men smile, but their eyes say hard things.
One says: "The world pulls a lot—it pulled my father
Away already, and that forty acres he bought
By Marietta is still black. I have to go now."
This was nineteen-forty, grasshoppers, hard times.
One comes back to the hands, none in pockets, all hanging down.
Two old women guard the group on both sides. They
Take nothing on trust. "I trust my hands, and that's all."

Reading *Silence in the Snowy Fields*

A word I love comes—snow; then fencepost
And dust and night and grass and barndoor,
Also light pole and cottonwood, but seldom *you*.
That's how the words flowed when I was thirty,

Or even forty. It's as if some furtive men said,
"This word *you* is not right. It would lead you
To imagine closeness. We know that
Won't happen. We have your best interests in mind."

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The ones who spoke—the old ones—lived
Inside the Shirley Temple creamers of blue glass
That stood on our kitchen table; they blessed us,
We thought, along with the County Extension Agent,

Our teachers, and the Philip Morris Mystery Theater.
Some mornings I wake and with a turn of the head
I send the furtive men back into their blue glass;
Then I too speak this beautiful word *you*.

The Boy Looking for His Parents

Maybe you've heard the story about the boy
Who came flying down here on a milkweed pod.
He landed in a field. There wasn't much in his pockets
When he looked—a claim check for a parcel, no name.

He put on his shoes and started walking.
An old man said to him: "You know up ahead
There's a mountain—maybe you belong there."
An elk on the mountain said: "You do have parents,

If you walk long enough you'll find them."
He did. They said to him, "You are our son."
Then a groundhog said: "You're not their son any longer.
You're a child of whoever first told stories."

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STEPHEN DOBYNS

When a Friend

Ellis Settle, 1924–93

When a friend dies, part
of oneself splits off
and spins into the outer dark.
No use calling it back.
No use saying I miss you.
Part of one's body has been riven.
One recollects gestures,
mostly trivial. The way
he pinched a cigarette,
the way he crouched on a chair.
Now he is less than a living flea.
Where has he gone, this person
that I loved? He is vapor now;
he is nothing. I remember
talking to him about the world.
What a rich place it became
within our vocabulary. I did not
love it half so much until
he spoke of it, until it was sifted
through the adjectives of our discussion.
And now my friend is dead.
His warm hand has been reversed.
His movements across a room
have been erased. How I wish,
he was someplace specific. He
is nowhere. He is absence.
When he spoke of the things
he loved—books, music, pictures,
the articulation of idea—
his body shook as if a wire
within him suddenly surged.
In passion, he filled the room.
Where has he gone, this friend

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that I loved? The way he shaved,
the way he cut his hair, even
the way he squinted when he talked,
when he embraced idea, held it—
all vanished. He has been reduced
to memory. The books he loved,
I see them on my shelves. The words
he spoke still group around me. But
this is chaff. This is the container
now that heart has been scraped out.
He is defunct now. His body is less
than cinders; less than a sentence
after being whispered. He is the zero
from which a man has vanished. He
was the smartest, most vibrant,
like a match suddenly struck, flaring;
now he is sweepings in a roadway,
all the whatevers have been pushed aside.
Where is he gone? He is nowhere.
My friends, I knew a wonderful man,
these words approximate him,
as chips of stone approximate
a tower, as wind approximates a song.

Rattletrap

Odysseus, when he is at last met in Book Five,
is weeping and full of grievance. At night
he naps with his queenly nymph and again
begins to complain. All he wants is to go back
to his homeland, but when Kalypso offers to help
build a raft, Odysseus suspects a trick, continues
to grumble, says the trip would be arduous

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and risky. Much nicer to be sad with a luscious
immortal than to capsize in the Aegean. He won't
be duped. It's all a plot to make him shut up,
till even Kalypso calls him naughty and is forced
to swear a great oath. Then Odysseus believes her,
but grudgingly. Isn't this the kind of hero
we like best, someone scared to death? And why

does he suspect a trick? Because he himself
is the master of deceit. Why fight if he can lie,
why lie if he can stab in the back. But maybe Homer
got the story wrong. Maybe Kalypso didn't permit
Odysseus to depart, she probably kicked him out.
After all, what made him mortal also made him whine.
His complaints became his single favorite subject

and were he to receive the gift of immortality
he would be rendered speechless, since without
Death why should he open his trap? Perhaps that's why
any of us talk. If Sleep is the twin brother
of Death, isn't Silence at least a first cousin?
Consequently we jabber, not to communicate, but
to keep the motor running. Kalypso no doubt had

gotten sick of the ruckus, so she let Odysseus
make a raft of twenty logs, add sails, barrels
of supplies and called a wind to set him traveling.
Soon the chatterbox was gone. It took three weeks
with gales and terrible trouble to make landfall.
Odysseus must have yelled the whole time, as if Death
loathed the sound of the human voice and fled

from any verbal racket. It must hurt Death's ears
as a high-pitched whistle hurts a hound's. Doesn't art
have this purpose as well? It pushes the darkness back.
But what appears to us symphonic must sound to Death
like breaking glass. Yet when Death cries out how sweet
must be its music, because when Odysseus heard Death's
voice drifting across from the Island of the Sirens,

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his one wish was to pass through its door to the green
land beyond. Luckily, he was tied to the mast, and once
his ship was out of range, he must have jabber, jabber,
jabbered, a hero like any other, preferring pleasure
to warfare, the hearth to the long march, a string
of witless jokes to drive disaster from the door,
the human whine that accompanies the long decline.

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CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY

Dreaming the Clouds of 1956

The tall buildings bored and sagging
against the sky—here's Woolworth's,
the Granada, the Carillo Hotel, just enough
dulled gilt at the corners to keep up an air
of complacency—a bright grey burning through
the feathered palms.
A mist moving
over the heart's long streets, foghorn
up from the breakwater like a broken vow
of happiness. A little wind reminds the eucalyptus
of something, pushes me along the sidewalks
in my haircut, my navy school sweater tied
about my waist,
I am still the boy I remember, tugging
my mother's coat, pulling her in to the shoe store
where I stand on the fluoroscope and the green
network of my feet glows through my Buster Browns
in two clouds of mystery.
Raindrops on the window
sparkle like stars—and later a few stars work through
clouds, blunt and silver as Coca Cola bottle caps,
a swirl and glimmering slur, river running
off in the vague direction of everything
yet to come . . .
Long run-on sentences of rain
on the glass, and in English class, Sr. Julie told us
a preposition was anything you could do to a cloud,
though I was always somewhere between the tree tops
and the mare's-tail sky, the phrases ascending
like smoke, like chalk clapped from erasers . . .

Waylay of dust, addendum to the silt built up

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in the soul's small bones—despite the scraped
knees and the unfailing numbers of pain
I counted to, nothing had undone the possibility
of the air, the pink clouds of my lungs or the harp-
like thrumming of blood along my wrists. About this sky,
nothing surrendered or doubtful as far as I could see,
as far as the world then went—boxcars, camels trailing
over the hills, the tablecloths of angels, lemon blossoms
and white caps across the bay—a horizon line
penciled in behind the floating islands . . . .

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ELLEN POTTER

Native Intelligence

She was big and blond. Homegrown. She was not at all what they wanted. They'd hoped to find their waitresses through the help of their friends who would know precisely what they were looking for: daughters or nieces, freshly sprung from the Classics Department or Art History or even Literature, providing it wasn't contemporary which usually turned young women into monsters. They should be able to speak glowingly about a good Chianti without being ridiculous. At the very least, Anne said, they should be "unobtrusive."

"Undernourished," thought Harriet. It was the final detail following a year of plotting the dream of their trattoria. On their last trip to Italy they'd torn apart three cities in search of the perfect terra cotta planters. They'd tolerated an obsequious art dealer in Florence who, when he'd deduced that Harriet and Anne were lovers, insisted on showing them every painting of the exalted vulva. But they'd endured and come off with several nice pieces to hang on the restaurant's ochre walls. Harriet's artwork hung on the walls too—small, sepia-inked etchings of wuthering landscapes. Just four years ago, Harriet used to paint portraits on oversized canvases. That was back when she first met Anne, then a student in one of Harriet's life drawing classes. Anne was so young, just twenty-two. Harriet was old enough to be her mother, and then some.

"This girl is so beautifully serious," Harriet thought at the time. Or maybe "beautiful and serious," Harriet could not remember.

The restaurant was their first business venture together, made possible by the death of Anne's mother and Anne's subsequent inheritance. Well, Harriet had contributed a little too. But not enough to feel she could insist on hiring the girl. Instead, she gently pointed out to Anne that their friends had not come through. The restaurant was due to open in a week.

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They were short-handed, desperate. And this girl, Jocelyn, although she wasn't their idea of things, she was, after all, experienced. Not in fine dining, maybe, but she would know the rhythms of a restaurant.

The day that they opened, Jocelyn showed up wearing a white blouse that looked like kitchen curtain valances, sewn together in tiers. White top, black pants, that was what they'd told her. Anne's cool, green eyes flicked up and down Jocelyn's body. Then she smiled, warmly even, and said, "What a pretty barrette in your hair. We're so nervous! At least, our waitress will be composed." So like Anne, thought Harriet. Just when you thought she could not tolerate a certain thing she would be especially kind. Harriet didn't blame Anne for her scrupulousness. She'd been born that way, afflicted with extraordinarily good taste. Her mother loved to tell the story of how, when she purchased an oak spindle armchair for the sitting room Anne, all of ten years old, made her take it back. Harriet could imagine it too—Anne's stricken, heart-shaped face, astounded that her mother could not see what was so painfully obvious to herself. It was with the same frustration that Anne used to stare at her own drawing pad in Harriet's class. Anne used to perspire when she drew, clutching her stick of charcoal as though it would wriggle out from between her narrow fingers. Harriet had rarely met a student so untalented. Her figure drawings all looked like dolls with articulated limbs.

"I know what I want," Anne used to insist when Harriet came to inspect her drawing.

From behind the chef's window, Harriet watched as Jocelyn set up the tables with the other waitresses. Jocelyn sang to herself as she moved around the restaurant. The song sounded dull but Jocelyn poked her head back and forth to the tune like a large, blond hen. Harriet hoped that Anne did not see. Jocelyn caught Harriet watching her and slapped her hand over her mouth.

Jocelyn needed to be corrected several times that night. For one, she spoke too loudly. Often her voice could be heard above the diners. Her laughter, in particular, irritated Anne—"The machine gun that shoots cotton candy." One table of professors handed Jocelyn a glass of their wine and she drank a toast with them.

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"The customers seem to enjoy her," Harriet said.

"Everyone enjoys a barmaid," Anne replied.

Jocelyn had come to the area because her boyfriend had gotten a job in the city. Before that she was working in a truck-stop restaurant on the side of a highway and looking after her father on his defunct dairy farm. She'd done nothing, knew nothing.

Once, Harriet asked her which food she most liked to eat. Jocelyn considered this, swallowing back the saliva that her thoughts produced.

"Chocolate."

"What kind of chocolate?"

"I don't know," Jocelyn said. "The kind in bars." Harriet left her and in a minute returned with a box of expensive Italian chocolates, an opening night gift from a friend. Harriet opened the box and held it out. Jocelyn plucked one out, unwrapped the silver, lattice-veined foil and popped the chocolate into her mouth. As she devoured it a small bead of chocolate saliva formed in the corner of her mouth. Harriet was reminded of a Yiddish saying that a friend of hers had told her—"If you're going to eat pork, let the juice run from your lips."

"Good?" Harriet asked. Jocelyn nodded as she swallowed the last bit.

"Just like Hershey's?"

"Smoother," Jocelyn said as her tongue worked the chocolate off her teeth.

"Exactly," said Harriet. "Now you know the difference."

After that, before every shift, Harriet called her into the kitchen and sat her on a stool. Placing morsels of the evening's menu on a plate she watched as Jocelyn tasted the strange food; strips of wafer-thin prosciutto, soft, fresh rounds of mozzarella chased by oily rectangles of foccaccia. Chicken and chanterelle risotto. Slices of rabbit braised in wine. The girl had an unexpected taste for certain foods. She loved the sun-dried tomatoes, sucking on them like coins; she liked the sweet, belly-white calamari, even after Harriet told her it was squid. And still, Harriet was uncertain whether or not Jocelyn knew what squid was. She especially loved the wild mushrooms, cooked or raw. Yet nothing in the world could induce her to try a shrimp.

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One Sunday, on a whim, Harriet called up Jocelyn to see if she wanted to go hunting for wild mushrooms. It was a hot, languorous morning. The air smelled sweet and leathery. Harriet and Jocelyn drove several miles out of town to a stretch of forest that Harriet often went to. They walked through the thick woods, enjoying the green coolness that swept at the back of their necks and the seamless waves of conversation and silence. In the open air, Jocelyn did not seem quite so loud or big. She moved through the woods soundlessly. Her powerful legs stepped nimbly over fallen logs. She was Artemis in a blue summer dress, her pale hair loose and already spiked with small twigs.

"You are so lovely!" Harriet said suddenly. The girl stopped. The expression on her face told Harriet that she had said the wrong thing.

"Harriet—" she began, her eyes unbearably piteous. What did Jocelyn see? An old dyke with fuzzed jowls. An older woman with a predilection for younger women.

"Oh, look what you've found!" Harriet interrupted her with forced joviality. Close to Jocelyn's feet, beneath an oak tree, was a cluster of chanterelles. Orange-colored, their edges were pleated like the sleeves of a summer nightgown. They picked them and dropped them into their pails.

The little incident had not spoiled their outing. If Jocelyn had momentarily been surprised, her natural easiness returned. She told Harriet that her boyfriend made fun of her cooking, called her the Del Monte queen. But her conversation was more deliberate now. She mentioned her boyfriend at least a dozen times.

"I meant nothing by it," Harriet thought to herself as they continued on. It was simply that Jocelyn had just struck her, at that moment, as being someone she would like to paint. It would be the least subtle of portraits: a canvas thick with brilliant yellow, with roiling Mediterranean blues and greens. And all around her, mushrooms, iridescent as fish. She wanted to tell this to Jocelyn but somehow was unable.

On their way back Harriet caught sight of pretty, flat-capped mushrooms near an elm tree.

"Destroying Angels," Harriet said. "Never pick these."

"Poisonous?"

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"Oh yes," Harriet said. Jocelyn knelt down to look at the neat, white caps, her arms folded against them.

Anne was sitting in front of the vanity with the fan blowing directly on her. Her short red hair was neatly pinned back off of her face. With a soft, white crayon she had drawn a curving line along the bottom of each eyebrow and was now plucking out the hairs that poked through. She heard Harriet's car pull up and the front door open and close. Harriet did not come looking for Anne right away. She heard the sluff of Harriet's slippers as she moved around downstairs. When Harriet did enter the room she was in a strange mood. Her eyes were fierce but without focus. She rubbed her forefinger and thumb together nervously as if hankering for her old smoking habit.

"Where have you been all morning?" Anne asked.

"Hunting mushrooms. You've drawn your eyebrows wrong."

"No I haven't," Anne insisted but checked in the mirror anyway.

"I took Jocelyn with me."

"Really?" Anne said, her pinkie finger smudging the white line. "What for?"

"For her company," Harriet replied. Anne twisted her head around to stare at Harriet with disbelief.

"What is it that you like best," Anne asked, "her keen insight or her brilliant conversation?"

"At least she's not ashamed of being alive!" Harriet snapped back.

"Oh!" Anne said as if her mate had just made the crucial point. "So now you're comparing the two of us. That's interesting. Tell me, are you trying to seduce her?"

"Of course not."

"Maybe I'm getting too old for you," Anne said. "A little too ripe? What about the one you were with before *me*? Wasn't she just about my age when you dropped her? Everyone knows that you have a taste for little girls, Harriet. But taste can turn into perversion if you're not careful."

"I don't want her!" Harriet screamed.

"It's a lie!" Anne pounded her vanity, rattling the mirror, then sunk her head into the palms of her hands. A strangled, high-pitched cry rose up from her. She sobbed in the most

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pitiful way because she struggled so hard against it. Harriet moved toward her but before she could touch her, Anne lifted her head and drew in a breath, wiped her eyes.

"She'll disappoint you in the end," she said to Harriet.

"How can she when there's nothing I want from her." Harriet spoke more gently.

"You want what all Romantics want from their objects of adoration," Anne said, recovering her composure. "You want her to be something more than she is."

"And what is she, according to you?" Harriet asked.

"The most ordinary person in the world. You can pick one up just like her at any shopping mall in the country. If you can't see that about her yet, *cara mia*, maybe you just don't get out enough." They ended the argument there, leaving Anne to finish her eyebrows while Harriet scrubbed the earth off her mushrooms.

Business was slow. Anne refused to advertise. She had an idea that the restaurant's existence should come to people's knowledge by word of mouth. People should feel that they had discovered the place on their own. That always made for the most devout clientele. But the other waitresses had no patience for her plan. Since they couldn't live on such meager tips, many of them quit. Jocelyn stayed on.

Whether from gratitude or more familiarity, Anne softened toward Jocelyn. On her birthday, Anne gave her a pair of earrings. They were made of papier-mâché and shaped to look like bright red chili peppers. Jocelyn loved them. She pinched their wire hooks between her fingers and jiggled them, exclaimed at how feather-light they felt. Harriet found herself marveling at her mate's prodigious ability to make the right choices, even in the case of something Anne herself would not be caught dead in.

After a while, Anne and Jocelyn became quite friendly. It annoyed Harriet at first. Since the fight she'd had with Anne, Harriet had made an effort to back off from Jocelyn. Now, Anne and Jocelyn could often be found sitting on the restaurant's back steps smoking and chatting like a pair of teen-agers. But, she had to admit, there was an improvement in Anne. It was good to see her behaving like a young woman which, after

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all, she still was. Harriet began to worry that Anne's character had suffered by being her companion. There was such a vast difference in their ages. All their friends were much older than Anne too. It was no wonder that Anne was prematurely sober and set in her ways.

One day, while Harriet was in the kitchen preparing a marinade, Jocelyn called in to say that she could not come to work. She'd obviously been crying, her voice was nasal and muffled.

"What is it?" Harriet asked.

"He's left me—just a note. You don't do that to a person! I don't care what reasons—and now, especially—oh, shit, Harriet. Shit."

Harriet guessed it.

"Who's going to cover for her?" Anne asked.

"You can take her tables, can't you?"

"This is no good," Anne said.

"She's upset," Harriet said. She opened a bottle of marsala, poured a little into a metal bowl and a little into her coffee cup.

"Well, now we're all upset."

"She's also pregnant." Harriet took a sip from her cup, her eyes on Anne. Anne's head lifted a little and her lips shut as though she were settling in to watch a play that she didn't think she was going to enjoy.

"Of course, she'll end the pregnancy," Anne said finally. Harriet shook her head.

"She's the type who will keep it."

"No! It's an impossible situation!" Anne cried.

"It's not for us to decide." Harriet's answer did not satisfy Anne. She looked down, as if the words she were looking for were beneath her feet.

"Sometimes," Anne started, "people are incapable of making the right decisions for themselves." She spoke in Italian. Even though she did not have a drop of Italian blood in her body, Anne often used the language when she was upset. "If this had happened when Jocelyn first came here I would have said, 'Fine, let her have it. She doesn't know anything better.' But it's different now. She's changed. She talks to me about traveling, about going back to school. Her view of the world has widened

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and let's be honest, Harriet. It's all thanks to you and what you've done with her. I never would have tried it myself. I've always felt that you should just let people settle into exactly what they were born to be. But don't you get the sense," Anne cinched her brow and leaned toward Harriet, "that Jocelyn could be so much more?"

"I've always felt that," Harriet reminded Anne.

"Then talk to her!" Anne pleaded. "She'll listen to you, Harriet. She's been listening to you all along."

Jocelyn lived on the top floor of a slumping house. The staircase was dimly lit. Harriet walked up carefully, fully winded by the time she reached the top. Jocelyn came to the door wearing a nightgown with a sweat shirt over it. Her eyes were swollen and listless. She didn't seem surprised to see Harriet and took no pains to smile at her.

Harriet handed Jocelyn a take-out tin of fettuccine, still warm, and made Jocelyn eat it as they sat in her living room. It was certainly a shabby little apartment. The furniture was a mess of garage sale specials, each with its own glaring injury. The curtains were nothing more than sheets, printed with blue and red sprigs, safety-pinned around the curtain rods. Yet the place looked clean. It smelled of orange peels and old carpet. It was cozy. A child would fit right in. And what a mother Jocelyn would make with her capable and warm-hearted nature. Who was Harriet to advise her against it? She held back her opinions. She let Jocelyn speak. And when, finally, Jocelyn came around to her pregnancy, Harriet leaned forward on the worn upholstered armchair and asked her what she was going to do. Jocelyn pressed her palms together and tucked them between her thighs. Her head bowed forward for a moment and when she looked up again she gave a small shrug.

"I always figured on having kids some day." In that light shrug, Jocelyn gave away everything. Anne was right. Jocelyn could be so much *more* than what she was. But not with a baby. It was sheer romance to think otherwise. Jocelyn had no education, no prospects. What she did have was native intelligence, literally. An American intelligence—inadequate but charged with a talent for receptivity. She might be anything or she might be nothing. It was entirely a matter of influence. With all her powers of persuasion, Harriet talked to Jocelyn

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well into the early morning. Finally, exhausted but satisfied she'd been understood, Harriet got up to leave. She wanted to hug the girl but was afraid it would remind Jocelyn of the time in the woods. She hugged her anyway.

"I bet Anne's really pissed at me for causing all this trouble," Jocelyn said.

"No, no," Harriet held up her finger in correction. "Anne understands everything."

The next day was a Monday and the restaurant was closed. Harriet and Anne spent the day sitting on their porch with a bottle of chardonnay between them. Speaking in Italian, they made plans for the restaurant, for new menus, the addition of several wines. Anne spoke the language much better than Harriet. To Harriet, the sound of spoken Italian recalled thick, plush moss grown over a stone of incalculable age and hardness. Inside the house the phone rang. Harriet leaned back into her chair, posturing herself against interruptions. Anne, however, was unable to let it keep ringing and went to answer it.

"That was Jocelyn," Anne said when she came back outside. "She just quit." Harriet stood up.

"Why, for heaven's sake?"

"She says she's going back home to live with her father."

"Does she want me to call her back?" Harriet asked poised to go inside. "I told her I would go with her to a doctor—"

"No need," Anne said smoothing her hair back. "She's *having* the baby." Harriet's insides clenched at this news. She sat back down, shook her head. Anne, on the other hand, was remarkably calm, practical. She told Harriet not to worry. Jocelyn knew a girl with plenty of experience and she'd be able to start work at the restaurant right away.

"Has Jocelyn told her father yet?"

"If she hasn't," Anne said, "she won't be able to keep it a secret for long. A big girl like that—" Anne's hands knotted together and she appeared to be picturing something that filled her with alarm. It all came clear to Harriet. She saw now what Anne herself must have seen on first hearing of Jocelyn's pregnancy—the spectacle of Jocelyn at eight, seven, hell even five months pregnant, a huge pink-faced sow or cow or some other breeding stock, her tremendous belly shading the tabletops as she took her orders. A girl like Jocelyn would not even

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spare them the last, outrageous ninth month. She would work till the end, waddling ridiculously through the restaurant, until her water broke right there, on the tiled floor, while she erupted with animal grunts of pain.

Harriet let out a slow "oooh" of sickening comprehension. She recalled Anne's plea against Jocelyn's baby, pitched in the most passionate of languages. God, Anne had been so convincing! It was Anne's words that had sent Harriet up that dark stairway and into the raggedy little apartment to persuade a young woman to end her pregnancy. And for what? Not for Jocelyn's sake. Anne had never given the girl a moment's consideration, Harriet could see that now. It was all for the trattoria, Anne's beautiful trattoria, where a pregnant waitress was a bit of vulgar decor not to be tolerated.

Anne replaced the cork in the wine bottle, picked up her glass, and turned to go back inside.

"*Non era di buon gusto,*" Harriet said to Anne's back. Anne turned, her clear eyes startled at an accusation she had never, in her entire life, heard leveled against her.

"Oh, Anne," Harriet repeated in English, "it was in very poor taste." Anne stood there for a minute, staring hard at Harriet as if to divine her meaning and assess its import.

"Do you love me any less?" Anne said finally. "Do you love me even a fraction less?" It was not a question. It was a challenge. After a moment's hesitation, Harriet nodded.

"Well," Anne said, "then we'll live without that fraction." Harriet knew she was right.

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LAURENCE LIEBERMAN

Romp of the Cave Healer

Of late, I've been death
haunted—morbid thoughts sapping my energies,
or nipping my best happy
visions in the bud,
each dawn. By midday,
I'll have sunk into a quagmire of bitter self muck. . . .
Dear Franz leads me
to the dank cave
of Pa Malblanco, the monkish shaman healer:
audacious healing bouts held
at infrequent
time sets, Pa never cures

fewer than three or more than seven afflicted souls at a Cave
Heal-in. . . . Four others
are to be exorcised and rehabbed in my mixed troop
of gloomsters, sociopaths and crazies.
The District Judge, after convicting two youths of *domestic mishaps*
(a young woman
who stabbed her father, the tailor, with his scissors;
a precocious teenage boy
who'd tried,
repeatedly, to rape both
his mom and two younger sisters, succeeded but once
with the youngest:
pre-teen nine-year-old), agreed to grant our healing chief shaman
three sessions to purge the wrongdoers
of the least impulse to commit family malfeasance.
If Pa Malblanco's
treatments work, if his rebirthing stratagems *take*, those accused

of base felony crimes
shall be given lengthy paroles, their jail
sentences waived. The last two

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in our ensemble:
a middle-aged woman,
struck down by grief when her three boys were zapped
by a fire that swept
through their house
one night—she hurtled from the second story,
smallest son blanket-wrapped
and cradled
in her arms (already snuffed

by smoke inhalation), she broke both legs, convinced she'd kept
her Alfred alive,
chary to relinquish her grip on the shredding blanket
for days thereafter, two men having to wrestle
a child cadaver from her bed before the stench drew rats & mongrels—
in a few more hours,
they'd have fought off *those varmints*. Now she wanders
the desert nights imploring
her lost sons
to return home, or she chants
wild monologues to ghosts of her long-dead father
and grandmother . . .
Who's left? A routine schizophrenic housewife. Of late, she shits
in the laundry tub and, nightly, beds down
with her old dray horse in the stable. *How do I fit in,*
mute tagalong
with this bleak gallery of the crestfallen? . . . We enter the cave

single file, each wound
in a rope chain taken twice about our waists
like mountain climber's gear.
If one of us
should misstep or fall
in cave dark, the next in line shall rescue the stumbler
(or drag him, helpless,
limbs flopping
on the cave bottom rocks: small comfort there) . . .
I ponder my place in the *buddy*
chain, wedged between
patricide and a sister

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rapist; I had better see to my own flat-footed, halting gait.
No flashlights permitted,
but our guru carries a single low candle, its light
guttering down in the dish. The little pool
of wax threatens to douse the short wick, sputtery. Our shadows,
thrown on the cave top
as we walk, loom wider and taller with every step.
At first, we duck our heads to keep
from scraping
our scalps on the roof, or low-
hanging stalactites. Soon the ceiling loft expands
higher and higher
becoming, at last, a capacious amphitheater that has been gouged
and hacked from the great walls of coral.
We continue our journey, in lockstep, for a half mile
or more, our shadows
grown to gigantic hulks above. . . . Pa Malblanco grunts an abrupt

halt, quenches the candle.
Two bluish lights sweep from wall to wall
overhead, we hear bats flutter
and swish: do bat wings
irradiate the blue flash,
aglimmer like fireflies' luminous abdomens? Blue gleams
surge and dim and surge,
circling the roof
dome of the high arena we all now inhabit.
Malblanco bids us to squat,
and we sit cross-
legged, our open hands

cupped over our knees, eyes fixed upon the concave arch above,
as in an Astrodome
or Planetarium. And indeed, those intense blue lights—
stationary now—could be planets or stars.
Our mentor climbs a squarish flat-topped rock. Seated in a circle
around this instant
stage set, we can just make out his bowed silhouette,
arms swinging from side to side
before him

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like an orangutan's. Then he stands
and rocks forward on the balls of his bare feet.
His breath comes scratchy,
he groans and sweeps his hands up and down and across his belly
massaging his innards, and at last, he makes
gurgles and great squishing sounds as if he, himself, is
a foetus struggling
to burst from its mother's womb. Now he lies on his side, and starts

rolling counterclockwise
on the flat mossy rock like a human top
spinning faster and faster.
Those gurgle sounds
grow louder and slurpier,
and finally, we hear a great rush of waters pour from him.
Soon we are all spattered
with a fine spray.
I lick a few drops from the back of my hand.
It tastes pure as spring water
that I sampled
earlier today; and yes,

he's tossing water on us with a long wooden ladle, scoopings
drawn from a secret well
below his legs. It tastes wonderful, rich and clean.
And then he leaps in a birthing dance, plays
the child newborn, howling its first breath wails of life & spewing
out amniotic waters—
foam gushed from the ruptured birth sac over our faces
and into our eyes. We stare down
that plethora
of bubbles and spray, now a froth
on our lips, and we commence howling with our master.
We have all risen
to our feet at once, unbidden, and leap as he leaps, those ropes
still binding our waists. So we must jump
in tandem, five hopscotch leapers on the springboards
of our rope-jump Souls,
hopping in place in perfect sync and simpatico with each other,

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the ropes flying loose
with our romp. Though no one signals another
to keep in step, we can all hear
the inaudible beat,
and we know this dance.
We first heard the rhythm the day we were born. Hours before
we were born, the cycle
of labor pangs—
coming in waves—gave us this motion, never
forgotten, revived this day.
Likewise, we know
the timbre of Pa's howls.

We first sang them at our first births. And today, they sing
themselves again, using
our throats in chorus, no two of our five voices
ever drifting out of perfect accord.
And more amazing yet, it does not surprise us for even a moment
that we should all rise
to the same pitch, stomp and chant to the same beat,
and know—all together—when it
shall be time
to stop. . . . The starry blue lights,
fixed in place as we wailed and leapt, start wheeling
and circling overhead,
fluttery, whooshing as bat wings. Now Pa waves his candle, relit
in its shallow dish, and leads us back
the way we came, those guideropes no longer needed.
We emerge from the cave-
mouth, a family of five, laughing and weeping our blustery thanks.

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PATRICIA HOOPER

The Best Hour

On reading that morning is the best time for human procreation.

Morning: the perfect hour for making love—
when the body wakes refreshed to greet the body
stretching to meet it from its artless slumber.
Could we have been mistaken after all
these years of simply waiting it out for darkness
so we could rush upstairs? Think of the hours
we've wasted dressing quickly, eating breakfast,
before day whisked you off. Think of the bees
coupling in broad daylight in the shrubbery
while we were pulling weeds or washing windows
to finish in time for lunch. Not that the sunset
moving across your shoulders wasn't lovely,
or the moonlight on the sheets or on the grass,
but thirty years of thinking it accidental
that sometimes, rolling over, just at dawn,
we'd tangle with abandon, still half-dreaming,
half in the world, half out, desirous
and surprised to be so yielding quite so early. . . .
Luckily I was in your path those mornings
you took fire like the trees the sun had touched.

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EMILY GROSHOLZ

Tour of the Flower Depot at Sanary

The gardener, who moonlights raising flowers
or rather, who sometimes daylights gardening,
stands by the open doors of the great warehouse
at five A.M., and motions me inside,
away from the bloody sunrise over Toulon.

The method of display and transportation
—monorail carriages, whose ratchety progress
through sale and shipment unseen powers direct—
is Dutch: Holland controls the flower market
from Patagonia to the shoals of Iceland.

Monsieur Canolle's carnations lie in dozens
of sorted colors, stiff in cellophane,
fit to survive a few Saharan hours.
We pass the floral merchandise exchange
where bids by stem and packet register

on three ten-foot clock faces on the walls.
The traders bid and smoke as the sun rises.
And then he buys me coffee in the little
flowerless, sunless cafeteria where
smoke spirals upwards as the truckers leave.

His father and grandfather raised carnations.
But more diseases strike the flowers now,
maladies in the water, air, and soil
that must in turn be drubbed by chemicals.
Earth, he observes, is tired of yielding flowers.

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RICHARD HORNBY

LA's 99-Seat Theatre

AMONG THE VAST, SUN-BLEACHED JUMBLE of low-rise buildings filling Los Angeles County, there are hundreds of abandoned warehouses, obsolete sound stages, former factories, timeworn storefronts, and other, indefinable structures that have been turned into theatres. There is even a rough little open-air theatre in Topanga Canyon, and an aquatic theatre on the lagoon of the old "Gilligan's Island" TV show. This is the world of 99-Seat Theatre, a quirk of nature formed in response to the intricate regulations of the Actors' Equity Association, which allow producers of small theatres in some circumstances to use professional actors without paying them.

The same phenomenon exists in New York City, where it is usually called "Equity Showcase" or "Off-Off-Broadway," but the rules in LA are more relaxed, in tune with life generally. Plays run longer here—sometimes for months, or even years—than in New York, where sixteen performances are the usual limit, and ticket prices can be higher, allowing funds for a decent set and costumes. The result is that 99-Seat Theatre in Los Angeles includes some adventuresome, talented, enduring theatre groups who are dedicated to more than just showcasing their talents to prospective agents and casting directors.

There used to be a joke that in America you can make a fortune as an actor, but not a living. This is no longer accurate. Now, you can make neither a fortune nor a living from acting in the theatre, but there are actually hundreds of actors in LA earning solid, middle-class incomes from TV commercials, radio and TV voiceovers (a surprisingly lucrative field), and supporting roles on television and in film. These individuals tend to be more theatrically oriented than the typical Hollywood film actor of the past; many were trained in university theatre departments or major theatre conservatories, both relatively new in the United States. The result is that some of your favorite TV performers turn out to be surprisingly good stage actors. Everybody laughed when the Mark Taper Forum announced a few years ago that Kelsey Grammer, then appearing regularly as Frasier on "Cheers," would play Richard II, but in the event Grammer, trained at Juilliard, was superb in Shakespeare's most poetic role, giving a beautifully spoken, subtly characterized performance. The Taper is a large theatre, with the leading theatre company in Los Angeles, paying actors union scale, but in the best 99-seat theatres, such as the Odyssey in West Los Angeles, The Matrix and The Actors'

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Gang in Hollywood, the Interact Theatre in North Hollywood, or Glendale's A Noise Within, you can at times see world class performances in shabby surroundings, infinite riches in a little room.

One of the best of the small theatres has long been the Matrix Company on Melrose Avenue in Hollywood. It closed for a few years, then reopened last fall with an imaginative new policy: Producer Joseph Stern announced that each production would have a double cast. One of the problems with 99-Seat Theatre is that the unpaid actors are allowed to leave a play without giving notice. Since film and television jobs can pop up at the last minute, productions are often disrupted; I have even called for tickets at five in the afternoon, gone to dinner, and found the performance canceled when I arrived at the theatre at eight. The two casts at the Matrix alternate, but can also be mixed and matched to meet the demands of the busy actors' schedules.

Although Hollywood is the world of typecasting (Paramount Studios is a few blocks from the Matrix), no attempt is made here to have similar actors in the same role. In a superb production of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* last spring, for example, Charles Hallahan, a heavy-set, powerful actor with a harsh baritone voice, alternated the lead role of Hamm with the more slender, elegant Robin Gammell, whose voice is a light, crisp tenor. Hallahan brought out the tyrant in the blind, wheelchair-bound character, emphasizing his physical suffering; Gammell made his lively and witty, despite the still obvious afflictions. Both versions were defensible for this weird, expansive role, where Beckett, as usual, gives minute stage directions as to movement and business, but almost nothing on interpretation.

In a letter to his original American director, Alan Schneider, Beckett deplored other directors' tendency to treat his plays as philosophical treatises rather than as drama. The best way to stage Beckett is the same as with any other playwright, telling the play's story through action, leaving the philosophical analysis, if any, to those who will see it. As Beckett said of *Endgame*, "Hamm as stated, and Clov as stated, . . . in such a place, and in such a world." Andrew Robinson's direction of the Matrix production took this warning to heart. The script raises all sorts of questions: What made Hamm crippled and blind? Is Clov his servant, his son, or his lover? What is this bleak room they are trapped in, and how did the characters come there? Why does Hamm keep his parents in garbage cans? How could they possibly survive in them? Bad directors, like one who set *Endgame* in the New York subway, look upon these questions as puzzles to be solved through production; good ones like Robinson see them as puzzles to be *carried over* into production. What is Beckett without mystery?

Thus, the Matrix production of *Endgame* was admirably straightforward and tangible. Mathew C. Jacobs' drab, cinderblock set, with Doc Ballard's harsh, bleak lighting, seemed wonderfully ordinary, the

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epitome of bureaucratic architecture. Director Robinson followed Beckett's stage directions very carefully, making only one significant change: Instead of garbage cans, he put Nell and Nagg into a two-part dumpster with a sign, "CAUTION: DO NOT PLAY IN OR AROUND," a nice serendipitous touch. The focus of the production was on the acting; because of the double casting policy, I did not see everybody, but I certainly can praise Cotter Smith as an angular, acerbic Clov; Allan Arbus (formerly that wonderful psychiatrist on "M.A.S.H.") as a witty, lively Nagg; and Audra Lindley as a gentle, affecting Nell. But mentioning each actor in isolation does not do justice to this production, which was most notable for the way the characters related to one another; the spiteful bond between Hamm and Clov, the perverted father-son relationship between Nagg and Hamm, and the tender affection between Nagg and Nell were all potent, vivid connections. Beckett's plays are all about relationships, requiring good ensemble work, which the Matrix, despite the mix-or-match casting, always seems to achieve.

The Odyssey Theatre is another strong ensemble. Their production of David Edgar's *Mary Barnes*, which requires a large cast with a variety of accents, was a highlight of the LA spring season. Edgar is a British playwright best known for adapting Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby* for the Royal Shakespeare Company. *Mary Barnes*, written in 1978, is based on the story of a real-life schizophrenic woman treated by the psychiatrist R. D. Laing in the late 1960s at Kingsley Hall in East London. Laing's approach eschewed drugs, shock therapy, straitjacketing, or even a traditional hospital-like ambience; Kingsley Hall was simply a large old house, where physicians and patients (at least as depicted in the play) lived on an equal basis in a kind of hippy commune. Laing's theory is that psychotics are basically rational people whose symptoms are merely a strategy for dealing with overwhelming personal problems. A patient should not be "treated," but allowed to live through her schizophrenia, which can actually be a self-renewing process.

In writing his play, Edgar drew upon the book, *Mary Barnes: Two Accounts of a Journey through Madness*, written by Barnes herself and the psychiatrist closest to her, Joseph Berke. Laing appears not to have worked much with Barnes directly; the character based on him, "Hugo," a Scottish psychiatrist who floats through the play as an *éminence grise*, takes part in a lot of discussion about psychiatric treatment generally, but it is "Joe" who deals with the horrors of Mary's fears, rages, and infantile regressions. Literary treatments of madness usually romanticize it, but schizophrenia is not pretty, and Mary is no Ophelia. At one point, she wanders about stark naked, covered in her own excrement. (The actress in the role, Laurie O'Brien, said that she did not mind the nudity, but her character's schizophrenia terrified her.) The turning point in Mary's treatment occurs when Joe gives her some crayons and tells her to start drawing;

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the therapeutic effect of artistic creation is such that she not only becomes more lucid, but actually goes on to exhibit some of her paintings and drawings. She also seems to benefit from relating to other patients, including another woman with symptoms similar to her own, and her own brother, another schizophrenic who arrives at Kingsley Hall drugged almost senseless. Taking an interest in their problems helps to break her out of the terrible self-centeredness that characterizes emotional illness.

Edgar is neutral about Laing's approach. It certainly seems to help Mary, but then we feel that almost anyone would benefit from being treated decently, without condescension. We see no cures in the other patients, though Mary's brother does exhibit slight improvement. Edgar satirizes the 1960s attitudes of the staff, with their overweening belief in naturalness and formlessness; life in the house is continuous, noisy chaos. One psychiatrist leaves in disgust. The focus is simply on one woman's journey, from which it is impossible to generalize.

The Odyssey first performed Edgar's remarkable play back in 1982, which won it numerous awards, and established Laurie O'Brien's career as an actress. Since 1994–95 was the Odyssey's twenty-fifth season, it reprised some of its earlier successes, including *Mary Barnes* and *The Chicago Conspiracy Trial*; it also presented a superb production of Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing!*. These represent a wide range of production styles, but all have large casts and require a sensitivity to history. Recent history is often the most difficult to recapture; *Mary Barnes*, with setting by Eric Warren and costumes by Amy Kaufman, seemed quintessentially sixties and dismally English; the dusty brown set reminded me of many London digs I have spent time in myself. Laurie O'Brien repeated her role, and won some more awards; she and the rest of the cast, under the direction of Ron Sossi, founder of the Odyssey, did superb ensemble work, despite being largely a pickup cast, which had had many changes by the time I saw it. Only one cast member, Ginta Rae as the disturbed newcomer whom Mary befriends, had a bad English accent, but her acting was so emotionally true that I forgave her for it.

I have become notorious for complaining about the poor quality of American stage acting, in contrast with that of the rest of the world, especially England. My experience in recent years, however, suggests that I have been blaming the wrong people. The fault lies with our directors, whose bad casting and incompetent staging defeat their productions. With theatre companies like the Matrix and the Odyssey, and directors like Andrew Robinson and Ron Sossi, whose best productions are the equal to those anywhere, I have come to realize that we do have the actors capable of forming a truly national theatre, if it could ever be funded in these dark financial days.

Revivals of Broadway musicals have become so popular that at any given time there are usually more old musicals playing than new ones.

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Following up on the outstanding success of the revival of *Guys and Dolls* of two years ago, which is still running, a new production of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, directed by Des McAnuff, opened on Broadway in March, brought in from the La Jolla Playhouse. Originally produced in 1961, *How to Succeed* has music and lyrics by Frank Loesser and book by Abe Burrows, the same two who had brought off *Guys and Dolls* in 1950, but the intervening eleven years were not kind to the pair, nor to the American musical generally. The critical consensus seemed to be that the new production of *How to Succeed* was a weak rendition of a masterpiece, but I found it an acceptably performed version of a lesser Loesser.

The score of *How to Succeed* has only one good song in it, "I Believe in You," and even it is performed as a spoof, sung by the young hero to himself in a men's room mirror. The other numbers are lifeless, lacking in drive, wit, romance, or charm, unlike the glorious score of *Guys and Dolls*, which has only one *bad* song in it, among half a dozen masterpieces. But by 1961, nobody else was writing good Broadway music anymore either; it had been killed by rock, a form not suited to dramatic performance. There have been a few attempts at rock musicals, but they are hampered by the fact that rock is an expression of a singer's personality rather than of a characterization. A Mick Jagger or a Janis Joplin are supposed to be singing about *themselves*; when Al Jolson sang "I'm Just Wild about Harry," or Celeste Holm sang "I'm Just a Girl Who Can't Say No," they were obviously doing so in character. This not only meant that they made sense dramatically, but that other people could sing the songs; when a Broadway number was a success, it was immediately picked up by performers in cabarets, on the radio, or on recordings, which in turn promoted the musical it came from. Rock, among its other foibles, broke the link between popular music and drama. We associate a rock song with a particular personality rather than with a show, or a character in it.

The book of *How to Succeed* is a lampoon of American corporate life. Following popular novels and sociological studies of its period like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, *The Organization Man*, or *The Lonely Crowd*, it depicts big business as rife with conformity, nepotism, and backstabbing. A young man named J. Pierrepont Finch works his way up from the mailroom of the World Wide Wicket Company to its presidency. Despite a pleasant, self-deprecating manner, he easily knocks off his opponents, by shrewdly evaluating the workings of the company and the psychology of those who run it. As satire, the play is lame, and dated. World Wide Wickets is such a hopeless organization, run by such total incompetents, that today it would soon be wiped out by foreign competition—and a good thing, too. Finch's rise is so easy, his methods so obvious, and his morals so lacking, that we have little emotional identification with him, not caring when he is threatened, nor rejoicing when he succeeds. The depiction of the principal women in the play—a dumb blonde having an affair with

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the president, and a self-effacing secretary longing for marriage, home, and family with Finch—is so grotesquely sexist that only a Rush Limbaugh could appreciate it today. *How to Succeed* is famous for having made Robert Morse a star, but after seeing this revival I could only conclude that the reverse was also true, that his kinetic performance must have made the dreary material function.

In the revival, Matthew Broderick as Finch was not a rubber-faced Machiavel like Morse, but he had considerable stage presence and charm. He moves and sings well, and, employing an Archie Andrews voice and easy manner, made the character less manic and more naive than his predecessor had. Although we still never identified with him, we could at least enjoy his technique. But the star of the La Jolla/Broadway production was the set designer, John Arnone, who employed bold, primary colors in Mondrian patterns to recall the modernist style of the fifties and early sixties, plus spectacular scenic effects using dozens of large TV screens programmed by computer to create fantastic, witty illustrations. Susan Hilferty's costumes picked up the primary colors of the set; one of the costumes even had a Mondrian design of its own. But good performances and good designs could not entirely hide the shallowness of the material; *Guys and Dolls*, though comic in tone throughout, has serious undertones and characters we care about, but *How to Succeed* is a mere cartoon.

You Heard It Here: Terrence McNally's new play, *Master Class*, which I saw in Los Angeles in June at the Mark Taper Forum, will fail when it goes on to Broadway in November. The biggest box office hit at the Taper in four years, it has a dynamic performance by Zoe Caldwell, in the role of Maria Callas, and an amazing supporting cast of young opera singers, but the script is under-developed. Opera fans in LA loved the show, but the New York theatre critics are not opera buffs, nor forgiving of loose, muddled playwriting.

The play has Maria Callas, near the end of her life, offering a master class to three aspiring opera singers. The class is supposed to be taking place with an audience, in an actual opera house, giving Caldwell, as Callas, wonderful opportunities to acknowledge our presence and play to us. "No applause!" she proclaims, as she strides onto the brightly lit stage. "We're here to work!" Although she does croak a few notes at one point, Caldwell does not do any actual singing; not only has Callas lost much of her voice by this time, but she is trying, often unsuccessfully, to highlight the students rather than herself. The three young hopefuls are all fine singers technically, so that her coaching focuses on their acting rather than on singing per se, though she insists (as did Stanislavski) that in opera the acting values should come primarily from the music.

The first young hopeful, played by Karen Kay Cody, a plump soprano in a hideous pink dress, never gets off more than a single note from her selection, *"O! se una volta sola,"* from Bellini's *La*

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Sonnambula. Callas interrupts, corrects, and rambles on about her own career. The second singer, played by tenor Jay Hunter Morris, manages to get through his aria, *"Recondita armonia,"* from *Tosca*. Beforehand, he announces in a Southern twang that his idol is Mario Lanza (!), and that his main goal is to be rich and famous, fulfilling the stereotype of the tenor with a rich voice and an impoverished mind. Callas teaches him some much-needed humility, but otherwise he too develops little as a singer-actor.

The third singer is played by Audra McDonald, a beautiful young black woman with a knockout soprano voice. Her selection is *"Nel dì della vittoria"* from Verdi's *Macbeth*, a gutsy choice that she sings well. As with the others, however, her acting is stiff and lifeless. Callas' "coaching" (bullying would be more like it!) proves too much for the soprano, who tells the old girl off and stalks out.

The play has conflict, but no development; it is really just the same gag repeated three times, with an abrupt ending. McNally's writing, like so much American playwriting today, lacks structure. The premise of *Master Class* allows Callas to babble at random—indeed, her randomness is the basic joke—but the loose premise turns out to be not loose enough. McNally has the lights fade while she goes into two long, boring soliloquies, spoken memory arias in which she recalls her relationship with Aristotle Onassis. These merely detract from the master class, having nothing to do with opera or Callas' theories of how to sing it. Furthermore, her ruminations on life and art are disappointing; they teach the students nothing, and, like the plot, go nowhere. McNally knows opera, as evidenced by his weekly appearance on those intermission quizzes broadcast from the Met, but demonstrates no knowledge of music theory or performance theory, nor of aesthetic theory generally, in his *Master Class*.

The Australian-born Zoe Caldwell has smashing stage presence. She is actually a contralto, if not an outright tenor, but who cared? As noted, she did not really have to sing, and her ability to nail the other actors, or us in the audience, with a word, a look, or a turn of phrase was electrifying. She found considerable variety in what is basically a monotone role, and has enormous vocal power. It was the kind of bravura performance that the great nineteenth-century stage actors must have given—or that the great opera singers still give today. I only wish that she would act more frequently; she would be superb in many of the great female classical roles. Caldwell has foregone acting lately for directing. Too bad—except that she directs well too!

The rest of the cast were impressive actors as well as singers, the irony being how *good* they were at playing *bad* acting. They were assisted by Jane Greenwood's skillful, differentiating costumes that perfectly expressed each character. Cody wore the pink tunic already described; Morris' tweed jacket and tie made him look like a chubby nerd; McDonald was overdressed in a magnificent green taffeta gown. Callas in the play stresses the importance of having "a look," which,

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willy-nilly, they all have—though not the right ones. Her own look was that of a black panther, in a black silk blouse and extra wide slacks, as she prowled and posed about the stage looking ready to devour her pupils like prey. I shall hedge my bet and say that with its good designs and terrific performances, plus solid direction from Leonard Foglia, *Master Class* may still succeed on Broadway. But for a much better play about Maria Callas, read *Galas* by the late Charles Ludlam; played ten years ago with him in the title role in drag, it was both travesty and tragedy, a much more worthy depiction of the singer's complex life.

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MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Survival Skills

WHAT BIG DANCE DOES THESE DAYS is mostly marketing, institutional promotion rather than *la danse pour la danse*. Even dance performance itself seems to be concerned with selling the audience on what they came for. The traditional sequence seems reversed: instead of buying a ticket because you like dance, and then supporting the institution when you're satisfied, you enter the theater as an investor and if you get repaid by the performance, then the dance has gained a fan. Big dance isn't only the ballet companies, which have huge budgets to meet, but small and medium-size modern dance companies trying to work on a more or less year-round basis.

American Ballet Theater's spring New York season arrived on a campaign blitz that included a high-gloss program book, the hyped return of Twyla Tharp to the fold, and the release—first in a theater, later on public TV—of Frederick Wiseman's film *Ballet*. All these events could have held artistic interest, but all of them also resembled public service announcements for the company, which appeared to be in a relatively healthy phase of its chronic fiscal indisposition.

The Wiseman film, a seemingly disinterested look at the company, "chronicles the reality of American Ballet Theater," according to a Channel 13 press release. The respected documentary filmmaker had not yet turned his camera on a dance subject, and the three-hour film received major support from several public broadcast media and the National Endowment for the Arts. Too bad they couldn't have funded some dancing instead. The deeper I got into the film, the more depressed I became at the banality of Wiseman's vision. Not a shot, not a scene in the movie reveals anything that hasn't been said about ballet before. Wiseman yielded to every clichéd enthusiasm of the novice balletgoer: the sweaty body parts, the silk-shod feet, the tense backstage faces, the relentless teachers, the repetitive, grinding exercises.

There's almost no talking in the film. Most of that happens in offices. Cowering applicants are told they didn't make the cut, former company director Jane Hermann harasses presenters over the phone, ballet master David Richardson is interviewed by the late dance writer Otis Stuart. Terse dialogue in rehearsal scenes fades in and out, overheard but not understood. Hours into the movie, the company goes on tour to Greece, then to Copenhagen. The dancers—kids on holiday—sun themselves in between run-throughs, ride the rides in

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Tivoli. As a grand finale, after sketchy bits of performances, we get company stars Alessandra Ferri and Julio Bocca flinging passionately through two scenes from Kenneth MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet.*

So Wiseman's picture of Ballet is not only trite but condescending. None of the speakers, teachers, choreographers, dancers, or anyone else is identified, either in the film or in end-credits. Grownups do the talking. Dancers don't talk, they go to amusement parks, take care of their stressed bodies, and think about clothes. They don't even dance ballets, not in full performance views. Wiseman's camera zooms in on them from strange angles, cuts away to the audience, stops when it gets bored.

If the film is a disappointment, the fact that it was made at all props up the company, and the enterprise of ballet itself. Wiseman endorses the arts and has noticed that ballet people are dedicated. In canned interviews released by NET, he remarks on the "unmistakable force and sincerity in their approach." Yet he adds a disclaimer: "I have no more interest in making a statement about the importance of artists than I do about the importance of teachers or police officers." I don't know what to make of this extraordinary disclosure. Maybe it represents some new kind of objectivity in the arts, where the signifier is more important than the signified. It seems to be shared by choreographers. Tharp's new works, and the other two premieres I saw, seemed detached, even insincere, designed to prop up the idea of ballet in a society that's trashing art in a big way. All of them told you over and over what a moving, beautiful, exciting thing ballet is and how physical excess means moral perfection.

There was Lar Lubovitch's *A Brahms Symphony* (No. 3), most of which he had choreographed ten years ago for his own company. Last spring he expanded the ensemble to nineteen and added the last movement for ABT. Four solo dancers in saturated colors were counterpointed against the black-clad corps, which swirled and surged across the stage in massive waves. Lubovitch's movement has little to do with virtuosity but everything to do with flow. Bodies alone, in couples, in groups, fling out in sculptural curves when the music is fast, stretch languidly when it's slow. The soloists seemed to represent something, but I didn't know what. Lubovitch's work is impressive without making any demands on the audience. Probably his effects are similar to those of Léonide Massine's imposing symphonic allegories in the 1940s, except that in those days the audience wanted to be astounded by ballet dancers' technical feats; those are a dime a dozen today.

States of Grace, by James Kudelka, drew on another musical classic, Paul Hindemith's "Mathis der Maler" symphony. This was knottier but in the end no more lucid than the Lubovitch. Three female soloists were hoisted and manipulated by various men in tricky designs that indicated suffering and religiosity. I thought the ballet might have had some reference to the source of the music, medieval painter Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece, but I didn't read

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any promotional or critical confirmation of this, and I don't think the audience cared.

Tharp's *How Near Heaven* (to the Benjamin Britten "Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge") also aspired to cosmic meaning, by the choreographer's own admission. Before the season, Tharp said some pretty pompous things to the Sunday *New York Times*, which headlined a page-one-plus-full-page-inside interview "Twyla Tharp's Metaphysical Muse." I have to admit that I become nervous about Tharp when she talks most elevatedly about her work. Here, two female soloists, Susan Jaffe and Kathleen Moore, are supposed to represent subjectivity and objectivity, while a featured couple (Cynthia Harvey and Charles Askegard) are more stable or complete ("intact" was Tharp's word). Heavy stuff.

Again the audience was treated to masses of perpetual motion and the sight of star dancers doing important things. Like her choice of music, Tharp's choreographic scheme was imaginative, but somehow the ballet looked eccentric rather than original. It didn't seem to hang together. Moore and Jaffe had some nice duets, dancing close together in an intimate way rather than showing off. Jaffe was partnered by two men (Gil Boggs and Guillaume Graffin), while Harvey and Askegard hardly danced at all, wafting through every once in a while and gazing sedately at the audience.

What really surprised me about the ballet was how little relationship there seemed to be between these principals and an ensemble of twelve men and women, who were a very noticeable presence but whose movement didn't match theirs. Their rhythms and body shapes seemed to come from an alien source, rather than a complementary one. On one program *How Near Heaven* and *A Brahms Symphony* were programmed with George Balanchine's *Theme and Variations*, and then the virtues of classicism became totally clear. *Theme*, a glorious textbook case, shows you everything about the range of relationships that are possible between dancers, between steps, between categories of movement, between music and dancing. *Theme*, by the way, was choreographed for Ballet Theater in 1947, when Balanchine hadn't yet stabilized a company of his own and freelanced every chance he got.

For months I had been looking forward to the gala that celebrated Tharp's return to ABT after five years. Three new ballets by Tharp on one evening. What I didn't learn until the night of the performance was that only one of the premieres, the Britten, was going into repertory. The other two were throwaways. Now Tharp's throwaways can be better than most people's major work, but not in this case. *Americans We* and *Jump Start* showed Tharp in her patriotic guise, which often makes her revert to stereotyping and automatism. *Americans We* was set to nineteenth-century parlor songs like "I Dream of Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair" and reminded me of too many other ballets to be pleasant. *Jump Start* had live music by Wynton

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Marsalis and his orchestra, and presented stage renditions of assorted social dances—lindy, mambo, bebop, and so forth.

Ironically, at the moment when she is finally being celebrated by the establishment as a master choreographer, Tharp seems to be floundering creatively. Throughout her career she has formed deep and productive attachments to dancers, and their devotion to her has given credence to her originality. Even if the public didn't understand her, the dancers did. Freelancing the past few years, she's worked with some distinctive modern and ballet dancers—Jamie Bishton, Kevin O'Day, Jodi Melnick, Shawn Stevens, Stacy Caddell—independents who risked safer careers in order to join her, and brought a feisty confidence to her dances. Though she has a cadre in Ballet Theater that she trusts to interpret her work (Moore, Boggs, Jaffe, others), her dance now seems impersonal, almost circumspect. Tharp's old fans miss the articulation, the sensuality of her early movement style, which she seems to have traded in for an escalating virtuosity in speed and turning, and the poised, vertical body to support it. The choreography is emphatic, orderly, with nothing thrown away. There are no hidden nuances, no jokes but the obvious ones, no numbers that suddenly reveal a treasure in a dancer you'd taken for granted.

I have great faith in Tharp's ability to galvanize the ballet stage, in "pure" ways as well as entertaining ones. *Bach Partita* (1983), *Quartet* (1989), and *Brief Fling* (1989) are examples of rigorous but ingenious things she's done for ABT that have disappeared. Perhaps she's decided her reformist efforts aren't appreciated there, so she needn't waste them. The company's faint-hearted New York repertory this spring was packed with full-length ballets: 44 of the 64 performances were either *Giselle, La Bayadère, Romeo and Juliet,* or *Don Quixote.* Reconstituted from the past or newly invented, these productions give the audience what it wants: beautiful ballerinas, romantic suitors who can jump like grasshoppers, neat rows of chorus girls in filmy dresses, lush symphonic music, and fantasy plots enacted with plenty of authentic local color. Tharp's previous efforts to renovate this formula have sometimes been fabulously successful (*Push Comes to Shove,* 1976), sometimes unclassifiable (*Everlast,* 1989), but ABT backed off from keeping the borderline ones around long enough to gain a following. I sometimes think even *Push* would have evaporated without the magnetic attraction of Mikhail Baryshnikov in its first few years.

Ballet Theater has never claimed to be an experimental company, but it seems to me our definition of what is good dance is beginning to merge with what is safe, and innovation—or even minimal challenge—isn't a choreographer's most compelling goal. This idea occurred to me while looking at David Parsons' modern dance company during its two-week run at the Joyce Theater. Parsons, who danced for nine years with Paul Taylor, has a mordant wit, a plush sense of movement, and a shrewd intelligence about dancemaking in the

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nineties. His successful ten-member company performs a varied repertory, all by Parsons. In the phenomenally balanced program I saw, there was a formal piece to classical music (*Bachiana*), a dark and demonic piece (*Touched by Time*), a trick piece (*Caught*, in which a solo dancer, usually Parsons, operates a strobe light while running and jumping, to create the illusion of levitation), and a jazz piece with live music (*Step Into My Dream*, with the Billy Taylor Trio).

The dancing was good, the choreography well-made. In some ways *Step Into My Dream* ventured beyond Tharp's similarly conceived Marsalis piece, allowing sections of actual improvisation between dancers and musicians, and offering invented movement in place of conventional jazz transcriptions. I was enjoying myself, even as I was thinking the program offered little besides diversion. Maybe this is what theater dance should be—the kind of success choreographers have always secretly longed for while proclaiming themselves devoted to higher things. Today, to get an audience that comes because they like you and they like dancing, maybe you can't ask them to do anything.

David Parsons has also taken to the screen as a medium for reaching far beyond the theater. One night, channel surfing, I landed on a dance video that I soon determined was by Parsons. It didn't look like choreography, and it didn't look like drama. Later I tracked it down with the help of Parsons' company staff. Called *Fine Dining*, it's part of a 1992 video made in Denmark and directed by Thomas Grimm. The whole video is another eclectic program, including the comradely acrobatic duet for Parsons and Daniel Ezralow, *Brothers*, and *Reflections of Four*, a dance for women ankle-deep in water.

Fine Dining was a kind of danced counterpart to music video, with its look of a narrative gone haywire, its nonlinear editing and camera work. It starts in the everyday world, as Parsons and the dancers plod through a cafeteria line. Then it spaces out to a world of fantasy. Parsons is the headwaiter in a restaurant with a decidedly odd clientele and an elegant Old World Doppelgänger. The dining and dancing behavior of both sets of patrons, the demented moderns and the impeccable Continentals, is neatly choreographed, and so is some bizarre activity in the kitchen. *Fine Dining* owes as much to Charlie Chaplin as to David Byrne, and Grimm's zany camera work, which drives me nuts in his films of conventional ballets, is an asset here.

Maybe Parsons' approach is one answer for the millennium. The way things are going, the tab for art will have to be picked up by ticket buyers, either the aging conservatives who want to be comfortable with *Giselle*, or the generation that watches MTV and Steven Spielberg. Dance may not be able to survive at all if it has to depend on re-educating the audience every time, on convincing the public of its worthiness and high intent. Twyla Tharp was way ahead of everyone when she realized this twenty-five years ago. I hate to see her impersonating a middle-aged Rotarian now, but that alternative may lead to some kind of survival.

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ROBERT S. CLARK

Music Chronicle

THE ANNUAL VISITS OF WILLIAM CHRISTIE and his baroque-music ensemble of vocalists and instrumentalists called Les Arts Florissants have become something of a rite of spring for the New York metropolitan musical community. Even with the proliferation of early-music specialist groups over the past decade or so, there is nothing quite like this one anywhere else. Founded in 1979 by Christie, a native New Yorker, and based in Paris (its membership is multinational), Les Arts Florissants devotes itself to the performance of French, Italian, and English vocal repertoire of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and particularly in the French it has attained unequalled international repute. Though it has distinctions aplenty, Les Arts Florissants' eminence probably rests on three pillars: its membership, particularly the vocalists, has remained relatively stable for a number of years; its scholarship is sound but not smothering; and Christie himself as a leader demonstrates a remarkable ability to breathe life into styles and subjects that are probably as alien to our late twentieth-century sensibilities as any that can be found.

When Les Arts presented its fully staged production of Jean-Baptiste Lully's *Atys* in Brooklyn in 1992, it provided lay audiences, professional musicians, and critics with the occasion for a rare meeting of minds. The ensemble's theatrical alchemy made vivid musical drama out of what in other hands could have been a monotonous succession of musical declamation, stately ballet, and tedious allegory. Playgoers admired the fleet energy of the staging and the company's grasp of musical style; critics were impressed by the scrupulous preparation of the score and the musicianly mastery of period instruments and vocal idiom. In 1993 the group presented Jean-Phillipe Rameau's *comédies-ballets Castor et Pollux* and *Les Indes Galantes* in concert performances, again to general acclaim. And last year Les Arts again brought a fully staged production to the Brooklyn Academy of Music: Marc-Antoine Charpentier's *Médée* was infused with theatrical energy, the ensemble's grasp of the arcane style providing a fit frame for Lorraine Hunt's searing portrayal of the title role.

This year Les Arts Florissants came to town again, in late March, with something different. In commemoration of the tercentenary of the death of the English composer Henry Purcell, the company

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offered his *King Arthur*, a collaboration with John Dryden that was first seen at London's Dorset Garden theater in 1691. It is in that hybrid form, variously called "dramatic opera," "semi-opera," and, in French (charmingly), "*ambigue*," that characterizes Purcell's works for the stage, with the exception only of *Dido and Aeneas*. These were what we might now call multimedia entertainments, combining music, spoken dialogue, dance, and above all spectacle, for a newly emerging London commercial theater beginning to make French and Italian influences idiomatically its own.

The collaboration between composer and poet seems to have had its roots in the shifting political fortunes of the day. The scanty documentary evidence on Purcell's life is not conclusive, but he may have been Roman Catholic, as was Dryden, whose rather untimely conversion had taken place just a few years before the Catholic Stuarts were toppled. With the Glorious Revolution of 1689, in which the Protestants William III and Mary replaced James II, Dryden lost his post as Poet Laureate. Perforce both he and Purcell turned away from the court and to the theater to ply their trades.

King Arthur was not the first time the two had worked together. In 1690 Purcell had provided instrumental interludes and songs for Dryden's play *Amphitryon*, and afterward, when the play was published, the poet paid tribute to the composer: "What has been wanting on my part has been abundantly supplied by the excellent composition of Mr. Purcell, in whose person we have at length found an Englishman equal with the best abroad." But it was probably the fact that *Amphitryon* was a solid success on London and provincial boards that prompted Dryden's praise; his ear for musical quality does not seem to have been well developed.

But among the motives of the pair in again pooling their talents, one seems unquestionable: William III had returned to the capital from Ireland late in 1690, the hero of the Battle of the Boyne, in which the Catholic armies were routed. The moment could not have been more propitious for a patriotic stage work full of pageantry and propaganda, enumerating all the Britannic blessings and virtues, natural, ethnic, spiritual and martial. Dryden was ready: that *King Arthur* is the most unified of Purcell's semi-operas surely stems from the fact that the libretto, intended to flatter Charles II, had been prepared earlier, in 1683 or 1684, for an unknown composer. The poet altered it to suit first Charles's successor James and finally the House of Orange. Though both Italian and French influences are strong, Sir Jack Westrup's comment is apt: "However Dryden might attempt to imitate the accents of the Italian tongue, he could not avoid the flavour of his native English. That flavour is to be found, too, in Purcell's melodies."

Like Purcell's other semi-operas (*Dioclesian*, *The Fairy Queen* and *The Indian Queen*), *King Arthur, or the British Worthy*, is constructed around a series of loosely linked episodes or masques. But whereas the others

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have only four or five such episodes, Dryden's libretto calls for eight, another reflection of the influence of French *comédie-ballet.* Tied together by the thread of the abduction of Arthur's beloved Emmeline by the pagan Saxon king, and the Britons' struggle, with the help of the magician Merlin, to free her, the scenes each center on a visual image or a piece of elaborate stage business. Among them are the Saxons' animal and human sacrifices in Act I, a pastoral entertainment for Emmeline in Arthur's encampment in Act II, the "Frost Scene," purporting to demonstrate the thawing power of love, in Act III, Arthur's temptation by naked sirens and by nymphs and sylvans in Act IV, and so forth. The work concludes with the obligatory masque, as conjured up by Merlin, extolling Britain's plentiful "wealth, love and glory," its natural resources and its patron Saint George.

Purcell and Dryden's *King Arthur* had not been staged in its original form, combining music, spoken text, and dancing, for more than 200 years until William Christie was asked by the director of the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris to do so on the occasion of the tercentenary of the composer's death. The resulting stage version, directed by Graham Vick and designed by Paul Brown, opened February 9 of this year, and played to popular and critical enthusiasm for eight nights. Afterward it transferred to the Théâtre de Caen and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. The concert version, which was subsequently presented elsewhere in France and Switzerland before coming to Brooklyn, was identical to the mounted version in every respect except one—unfortunately a rather crucial one, more about which below.

Because Purcell was a pragmatic man of the theater, wrapped up in the vicissitudes of the moment and careless of posterity, his scores are often vexing, marked by lacunae, contradictions and crossed signals, confronting contemporary performing forces with the need to make historically informed decisions. In the case of *King Arthur,* Christie tells us in his introduction to the Erato recording made by Les Arts Florissants after the Châtelet performances (4509-98535-2), the score is "often chaotic in the extreme," particularly in the order of the individual numbers. I am not equipped either to attack or defend his choices on musicological grounds. But since his declared aim is not to offer a "neutral interpretation" but rather a dynamic theatrical experience, I can attest that he succeeds on his own terms.

To take a couple of examples, choosing to open the work with a single overture, in D minor, followed as was the custom by an Air, and to discard the D major overture, an adaptation of an ode inserted into the score in eighteenth-century performances, is easily justified. And quite defensible too is the decision to use the orchestral Chaconne, whose place in the score is a mystery, as the closing Grand Dance, which is missing from all manuscripts. Christie's invitation to the scholar Bruce Wood to adapt and complete the obviously corrupt

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manuscript of Honor's aria in tribute to Saint George, which Christie calls "bad Purcell, if it was Purcell at all," is more questionable. The aria, however, has an important structural function in the final scene, and could not have been omitted without seriously compromising its symmetry and weight. So this choice, like Christie's others, seemed in context to be both historically informed and theatrically imaginative.

But, as I suggested earlier, there was one choice that was not successful. For the concert version, Dryden's spoken dialogue was scrapped and replaced by a "link text" (so called in the program) by Jeremy Sams, who was also credited with the largely effective "semi-staging." Delivered by two nonsinging actors, Philip Franks and Sylvestre le Touzel, this interpolation was apparently intended to keep the audience abreast of the story to provide a vehicle for the musical numbers. But it more often hampered than facilitated understanding. Part of the problem was the "link text" itself: it veered with little warning between words spoken as if by the tale's characters (Arthur, Emmeline, Osmond) and third-person narrative. Added to this, the players frequently rushed through their lines as if embarrassed by them. But the chief offense of this ersatz text was not to the actors but to Dryden's beguiling lyrics. The actors' attempts to enliven their parts, alternating between mock fervor and broad mordancy, particularly at the blatantly patriotic moments, clashed badly in tone with what remained of the original.

No explanation was offered for the substitution. Perhaps the reason was budgetary—keeping the travelling company to a minimum. Yet the Châtelet version was said to have employed only three actors in nonsinging roles, and just nine singers all told, compared to eight in Brooklyn. But even if the travelling company could not cover all the singing and nonsinging roles comfortably, the question remains: could not a condensed version of Dryden's own text have sufficed? At least it would have been a better match for the lyrics.

Finally, however, it was the musical numbers that mattered most, and they more than compensated. Les Arts Florissants' glory is the quality of its ensemble, chorus and soloists now functioning as a unit, now separating to set each other off as responsorial foils, now recombining in concert with the instrumental backing. Purcell's music was created for just such forces with just such skills as they possess: when, in the first act, the chorus inflected Dryden's lines about "Brave souls, to be renown'd in story / Honor prizing, Death despising . . . ," with sensitively modulated tone that reached the ear as if from a single throat, the listener's spirits rose in anticipation of a rare musical treat to follow. And such expectations were not disappointed.

Still, some individual contributions did beg for mention: The bass Petteri Saloma was splendid in both the novelty piece for the Cold Genius in the "Frost Scene," with its repeated aspirate eighth notes, and the rollicking burlesque air for Comus, "Your hay it is mow'd." Susanna Waters's shimmering tone and firm control lent the well-

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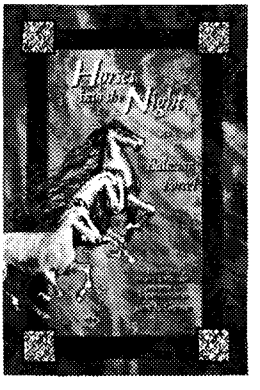
known paean to Britain, "Fairest isle, all isles excelling," a special grace. Succeeding her in the final scene, the estimable Sandrine Piau, whose vocal pungency imparts a unique dynamism to everything she essays, came forward and was joined by the bass Jonathan Best in the rousing duet "You say, 'tis Love creates the pain"—according to Dryden an import from another, unidentified work by Purcell, probably to facilitate costume changes, but no less welcome for that.

As the evening drew to a close, it was Christie who justly held the audience's attention. Leading his crack orchestra in an idiomatic rendering of the Chaconne, he erased any doubt about the Brooklyn Academy of Music's wisdom in asking him back year after year.

Horses into the Night

Baltasar Porcel

Translated from the Catalan language
by John L. Getman



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JOHN LOUGHERY

Just Deserts

IN EVERY AGE THERE HAVE BEEN ARTISTS lauded as giants, masters of the first rank, whose appeal is completely mystifying to later generations. The eminent Victorian Edwin Landseer comes to mind as one example (*very* big in his time, this painter of bloated nature and dogs on the hunt). Of course, the opposite is probably just as common: the talents we see as unmistakably important who were regarded as minor folk, interesting or otherwise, in their own day—think of Proust or Poe.

Yet a third category at least as perplexing involves those individuals of a measure of talent and some vision who are willy-nilly catapulted into the pantheon, situated well ahead of their more challenging peers. Neither offensively untalented nor spectacularly creative, they would, in the proper scheme of things, be comfortably settled in the middle, but fate and curatorial clout have determined otherwise. Two shows back-to-back at the Guggenheim Museum in 1995 offered fresh examples of this odd state of affairs. It's not unlike the guy down the block who wins the lottery; he's never done anything to deserve it and you don't actually dislike him, but the hope that life isn't all that random and unjust dies hard.

Ross Bleckner made a name for himself when he began showing at Mary Boone's gallery in SoHo in the early 1980s, but I would never have pegged him then as one for whom lightning was going to strike in the nineties. He made *nice* paintings. He made them pretty well. He stuck to the path that worked for him. In group shows he always held his own, that is, if the choice of the one or two Bleckners we would see had been carefully made. In any event, there should be a place for someone like this in any comprehensive survey of our time. As the mid-career retrospective of seventy paintings at the Guggenheim would have it, though, a good deal more is going on in Bleckner's art than some of us are able to see or acknowledge. From this angle, he is an heir to the Symbolist poetics of the fin de siècle crossed with the Op Art strategies of the sixties, an allusive formalist with a Whistler-like skill at lighting effects, and an elegist for the age of AIDS. What a tall order! And, indeed, those *are* the implicit ambitions of these huge, shimmering, dark paintings, and so Bleckner might also be fairly applauded for the largeness and seriousness of his goals. He thinks big, sort of, and he is nowhere near as excruciatingly bombastic as a Julian Schnabel or a Robert Longo. The trouble is that what we

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are given to look at, finally, does not deliver on these unspoken promises. For all of Bleckner's skill at what he does, there is an amazing thinness to the end result, particularly when viewed in the quantity the Guggenheim provided.

The paintings that seem to be most concerned with playing simple optical games are the most annoying. *Gate No. 2* (1986) with an old-style lock and keyhole painted in the middle and thin bands of paint stretching to the top of the canvas, where horizontal bars intersect the spikes of the "gate," might be making a portentous statement about a passage into another realm, but really all we can do in front of this and other paintings like it is marvel at the way stationary lines of color can seem to be lighted from behind or within and thus appear to be moving or reverberating—a quasi-thrill for all of several seconds. If Op Art was pretty small potatoes in its hey-dey thirty years ago, it surely isn't worth the trouble now. It's like any good card trick, a little clever and a lot stale. The paintings that allude to death, loss, and mourning at least give us more to look at. *Fallen Summer* (1988), for instance, is a nocturnal panoply of snow-flakes, leaves, and a light-emanating emblem, part chandelier and part coat of arms. *One Day Fever* (1986) shows one of Bleckner's trademark funeral urns to the right, while the calves and feet of a human figure who is ascending out of the picture in a shaft of flower-filled light occupy the central third of the canvas, all of this set against a space of fathomless purple-black. Some of these works are arch and some are eerie, but a number do manage to achieve an elegant, mournful dimension, as much by the streaky, gentle manner in which the paint is used as by the sentimental imagery itself. The "feel" of an impenetrable night sky, a fading photograph, a memory of a dream, an *hommage* to Gustave Moreau—they have their qualities. Again, *nice*. Not the stuff of great, probing art or, in a right view of the matter, not even the basis of a commanding career, though the tastemakers of the 1990s have evidently decided otherwise.

Thin and over-refined as Ross Bleckner is, Georg Baselitz aims to be robust and aggressive. He came to attention on these shores with that great wave of German Neo-Expressionists of the early 1980s, of whom only Anselm Kiefer (not even properly a Neo-Expressionist) is remembered today. His retrospective at the Guggenheim, hot on the heels of the Bleckner, came with a different set of expectations. Here is a man who is boisterous where Bleckner is fastidious, risk-taking where others are quietly calculating. It was, then, rather hard to figure out why the anticipated pleasures of this exhibition didn't materialize in the end. Whether working with remnants of the figure (his version of Millet's gleaner laboring over a blighted patch of earth is surely a painting for our time) or jabbing away with thick masses of paint to suggest a few still-life objects, Baselitz handles his materials well and has a superb sense of color. A child of the postwar trauma of

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Germany in the late 1940s, an attentive student of Willem de Kooning and Philip Guston, and a sculptor as well as a painter, he effectively merges a dour view of the world around him with the eagerness of a man born to the Abstract Expressionist approach to the art form—it's in his fingertips, this drive and ability to make objects that aren't "pictures" so much as strident forces of nature themselves.

Part of the problem must have to do with Baselitz's device of painting what recognizable imagery he retains in his now-formulaic manner—namely, upside-down. For the human figures, this can work better than for other themes, as we are then walloped by a sense of individuals agitated out of their equilibrium, but after a while, the approach becomes a perplexing routine (something that didn't happen in the 1980s when we saw fewer of the works at one time, in a gallery or a group show). About all this upside-down-ness, a wall plaque at the show informed us that Baselitz's goal was "to liberate representation from content" and that the placing of his figures on their heads "forces the viewer to accept a new way of perceiving reality and, in doing so, shifts attention to the plastic, painterly aspects of the work." Surely this is enough to call for an end to wall plaques. In what amounts to a Cliffs Notes version of the painter's thinking, Baselitz is presented as somehow ignorant of the fact that the battle against excessive concern with anecdotal reality and "subject matter" to the exclusion of formal interests wasn't fought and won circa 1890–1920. And we are supposed to assume that everyone flocking to the Camille Pissarro landscape show up the street at the Jewish Museum is going there because of a particular interest in poplars and that the weekend crowds at the Metropolitan's nineteenth-century European wing are especially fanatical about rowboats and apples. The *way* Pissarro and Cézanne mix their colors and apply their patches of paint to the canvas, and how that differs from the *way* Manet and Gauguin do the same, is what people have really been looking at for decades, and there is something too silly for words in the idea that Baselitz is drawing our wandering attention, finally, to the "plastic, painterly aspects" of art. No, the turning of the canvases upside down is just an art-school conceit, but it is (ironically) a worthy one in that it says something about modern art's uneasy relationship to recognizable imagery and the contemporary painter's love/hate bond to ostensible subject matter. Baselitz chafes against the image, tries and fails to do violence to it, and that tension, or frustration, is not without its drama. The spectacle of failure can be as instructive and engrossing as any pure success. His nervous flirtation with abstraction is what is interesting about Georg Baselitz, even if it prevents him from any definitive breakthroughs or enduring accomplishments. But it is quite off the mark to suggest that he is a pioneer of the brushstrokes-first school, not after a line that runs from the late Monet through Chaim Soutine and Franz Kline.

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Edward Hopper achieved his final canonization in the summer of 1995 with a major exhibition at the Whitney Museum and the simultaneous publication of the long-awaited catalogue raisonné. In early fall Gail Levin's monumental Hopper biography will be brought out by Knopf. (The catalogue raisonné from Norton is something new in that line: three volumes in book form, the fourth in the form of a CD-ROM, for a total cost of $600. The CD-ROM, to judge from the demo I saw at the Whitney, will tell you everything the three volumes do, but you can't buy it separately. Go figure.) As befits such an occasion, the show wasn't a traditional retrospective illustrating an important artist's growth from his student days under Robert Henri at the turn of the century through to the 1960s, but an examination of Hopper's *essence*. That meant we didn't get to see those wonderful early Paris pictures from 1906, which the Whitney showed two years or so ago, but we did get as clear an idea as possible of what Edward Hopper was all about.

The subjects of Hopper's art are simple and timeless, and probably too little attended to in American art which has often leaned toward heavy-duty anecdotal or socially meaningful content. The several sloping divisions of the third-floor space (the low walls produce a "slice" effect, suggesting parts of a larger whole, rather than a "room" effect) were designed to illustrate those elemental themes, not any chronological or stylistic breaks. Topics like night, summer sunlight, solitude, and privacy direct us to what ultimately mattered most to the artist, a man as far removed from the political and social turmoil of his day as an artist could be. I don't know that I agree at all with the museum's press release that discusses Hopper's vision as one that "has come to embody the American experience"—indeed, the exhibition is entitled "Hopper and the American Imagination"—as a preoccupation with the various qualities of light (natural or neon) or the act of looking through a window seems to me something that transcends national identity. If anything, this rejection of movement, clamor, and busy-ness in favor of stasis, quiet, and solitary contemplation seems distinctly and profoundly un-American, as if Hopper were reminding us of what as a nation we have always relentlessly turned from.

But the two most striking impressions that this magnificently arranged show left me with concerned the inappropriateness of all those down-home discussions of loneliness and alienation in Hopper, and the vitality of his artifice. Never before has this artist seemed so stagey, so concentrated in his evocations of imaginary space. Vladimir Nabokov used to enjoy tweaking realist writers of fiction by insisting that the best artists created their own fantastic worlds which had much less to do with "the real world" than we pretended. In this view, transcription and social commentary are at odds with the higher reaches of art. Balzac's Paris and Dickens' London were their own inventions, no different from Carroll's Wonderland, Nabokov maintained. Some of this sentiment fits with Hopper, too. It is appropriate,

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then, that much of the recent commentary (and this will play a large part in Levin's biography, I gather) stresses Hopper's passion for film and theater. These pictures are stage sets or movie stills in the mind, frozen moments that imply menace or impending action rather than exhaustion or loneliness. *Nighthawks* (1942) and *Automat* (1927) are well-known for their sinister, *film noir* edge, but there is nothing any less compelling in the lone figure at the back rail of *The Sheridan Theatre* (1937) standing beneath the dim, orange lights or the couple in *Room in New York* (1932) seen from outside their apartment window at an impossible angle or the man in *Office in a Small City* (1953) who sits at his desk peering out onto the rooftops around him. To be "about" alienation, there would have to be in these paintings some sense of a real world "out there" to be alienated from. But that isn't quite the case, and so the undercurrent of the work takes us in another, more fabulous but just as unnerving direction. In one of the best paintings in the exhibition, *House at Dusk* (1935) from the collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the apartment building and its sole visible tenant have been edged to the bottom left third of the canvas, while the outside steps illuminated by a street-lamp, the treetops, and the yellow night sky consume the rest of the space. This is a splendidly fictitious twilight zone, not the terrain we mortals occupy.

If all great art in the final analysis says, "Stop! Slow down. Look. This is what matters. Forget your world and enter for a time into my imagination, which isn't necessarily about your world as you know it," Edward Hopper in the 1995 Whitney show did just that, or came close enough. The wonder is that he hasn't been dismissed in our time as quaint or picturesque.

The artists Edward Hopper worked in opposition to ("all painting is painting *against* something as much as it is painting *for* something," the artist Sean Scully once remarked) were also on display last summer, at the Equitable Center Gallery in "The Impressionists' New York." Some of the key figures of this show, which made a nice counterpoint to the Hopper and was seen earlier in the year at museums in Montgomery, Alabama and Rochester, New York, were Childe Hassam, Gari Melchers, Edward Redfield, William Merritt Chase, and Colin Campbell Cooper. Why do I say the art of these men exists in opposition to Hopper's? Because so much of it is of a cotton-candy quality, turning the metropolis and modern life itself into an excuse for pretty colors, glib brushwork, a skin-deep hustle and bustle on the boulevards. None of the strangeness and hardness, the resoluteness, of Edward Hopper found its way into the souls of these painters. That said, it should be noted that the exhibition included some excellent surprises in Leon Kroll's raucous *Manhattan Rhythms* and three splendid Paul Cornoyers. Cornoyer is the single most unknown painter of worth from the World War I era (his name doesn't appear in any of the standard histories), but these brooding

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views of Washington Square, Madison Square, and Fifth-ninth Street at Central Park are tough-minded, soberly observed, and confidently painted—a more than satisfying balance to the fluff of Colin Campbell Cooper. If Cornoyer has little in common with Cooper or Chase or Gari Melchers, that only goes to prove that the contemporary use of the term "Impressionist" has long since ceased to mean much. Everybody and anybody is fit under that umbrella.

On the contemporary scene: the summer show at the Blum Helman Gallery was an odd experience. This establishment, which was an essential stop on any gallery-hopping round in the 1980s, is closing its doors for good, having lost along the way many of its "art stars" of the last decade (most notable among them was Donald Sultan). Mr. Blum and Mr. Helman are not parting amicably, either. So it was quite a hodgepodge that we saw in this vast, once-august space. For Lawrence Gipe and Katherine Bowling, though, one hopes that a well-established berth awaits them. Gipe paints large, detailed, industrial vistas with a lyric panache onto which he grafts phrases or sentences of a facetious or ironic character. The triptych at Blum Helman was from his series on the Krupp empire, as emblematic as any metaphor could be for the modern love affair with power and amoral energy. He wickedly lavishes the same sensuous care on a vat of molten ore or a blast furnace as a Hudson River School painter would on a mountaintop or a forest. (Gipe was the subject of a large exhibition last year at the Chrysler Museum in Norfolk, which I was able to catch—my first experience of his work in bulk, and an impressive sight it was.) Bowling deals with hills and trees, but in a decidedly post-modernist vein. Her three paintings on wood in this show had the same artificially aged, pockmarked, cavalierly treated quality we have applied to the paintings' subject in this land of nature anti-worship. This is an approach that isn't necessarily holding up well over time, but there is a significant level of craft at work here. At the Edward Thorp Gallery in SoHo the same month, Christopher Brown exhibited several paintings from his series on the Kennedy assassination, which for a reason beyond my comprehension the *New York Times* went after as an example par excellence of "bad art." Brown is in fact a very capable manipulator of paint and his sketchy oils of Jackie on the back of the car or the grassy knoll pedestrians taking cover—some of which have the look of photographs going out of focus, some of which depict the sprockets of a film, all of which are saturated in green—don't exploit their subject, but do prompt us to dwell on the nature of memory, our delicate and contradictory means of sustaining it, and the changes it undergoes as the years roll by.

The Whitney Biennial would have done well by a Gipe, a Bowling, or a Brown. Its rejection of the political emphasis of two years ago ironically provided even fewer visual pleasures or challenges than usual. The inclusion of more painters than has been the case in recent memory was especially depressing in that so few of them had anything

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to say, let alone the wit or skill to hold anyone's attention for long. This wasteland was not what the Whitney's critics had in mind in urging an aesthetic rather than a political agenda for the Biennials. Perhaps it is time this hoary institution (the Biennial, not the museum, that is) was put to rest. Periodic surveys of less sweep, focusing in more depth upon four or five artists per show, could only be an improvement.

In recent years, the Museum of Modern Art has been holding small, focused exhibitions during the summer months that, for those who are tired of blockbusters, are the perfect opportunity to bring the whole experience of looking at art back to a simpler, less hysterical base. Often these shows honor particular collectors. Last year it was the David and Peggy Rockefeller collection, with Picasso's *Girl with a Basket of Flowers* (1905) and Seurat's *Opus 217 . . . Portrait of Félix Fénéon in 1890* that called for repeated visits. This summer it was the collection of Louise Reinhardt Smith, which will one day enrich MoMA's holdings. A Matisse landscape from Collioure, a Derain portrait, two Degas monotypes, a Picasso bather of 1908, three macabre Redons: Mrs. Smith's tastes are impeccable. But who expects otherwise from the people who sit on the board of the Modern? It was two paintings in this two-room exhibition that stood out, though, and raised the level of the experience to an unusual height. Jacques Villon's self-portrait and Vassily Kandinsky's *Picture with an Archer*, painted in the same year (1909), would restore anyone's faith in what oil on canvas can do. Villon's brother Marcel Duchamp was busy plotting the end of the art form, but with a few dozen long, suggestive jabs of purple, green, and pink, Villon has given us a face and a palette held at chest-height—a hymn to a vocation more that the rendering of an individual. The Kandinsky is even more ebullient, more in love with the materials at hand and the treasures of the mind's eye. His archer on a leaping horse isn't merely crossing a plain in pursuit of his quarry; he is a part of a landscape in which all elements—hills, trees, rooftops, figures in the distance—are animated, equally alive and equally important.

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BERT CARDULLO

Spanish and American

AMERICAN CINEMA, LIKE THE DEMOCRATIC ART OF FILM all over the world, settled for the most part on the representation of everyday people after a brief flirtation with the upper class. Now here comes highborn, Harvard-educated Whit Stillman to revive our interest in that upper class as it was once glamorized-satirized in screwball comedies. Stillman made his directorial debut in 1990 with *Metropolitan*, which staked out his claim as chronicler-critic of the American gentry in a form—romantic-cum-social comedy—that goes all the way back to the English Restoration. The difference between that smart film and his second one is a widening of scope from the domestic or social sphere to the international and political one. *Metropolitan* was about talky Manhattan patricians and their amorous if not existential tribulations during debutante season; *Barcelona* is about those same patricians, in this instance from Chicago and all-male, as they mix with Spanish women in the Catalan capital of Barcelona (where Stillman has lived with his wife, who is a native). The time is "the last decade of the Cold War," which is to say the early-to-mid 1980s, when anti-Americanism and NATO-bashing were at their peak in Spain together with the hedonistic abandon that flourished inside her major cities in the wake of Franco's death. Stillman's focus is the city's fashionable midtown district with its decorative façades and minimalist interiors, where beauty has become a kind of secular god for all the beautiful people.

The very first shots of the film establish this gorgeous milieu to the tune of a delicate parody of patriotic American music, then we see the bombing of both the American Library and IBM headquarters intercut with a mirror shot of a Spanish beauty, Marta, being told by a man that her make-up is perfect. Superficial beauty, American intelligence (in both senses), U.S. business—deftly introduced, these will be some of the thematic motifs that Stillman weaves into his tale of Americans abroad in the late twentieth century. The Americans in this case are Ted and Fred Boynton, first cousins in their mid-to-late twenties. Ted is a sales representative for a Chicago firm who has lived in Barcelona for some time; Fred is a lieutenant in the Navy who arrives in this Mediterranean seaport to do advance public relations for a visit of the United States Sixth Fleet. Although Ted is not thrilled by Fred's unannounced appearance at his door, he allows his cousin to move into his spacious apartment as well as his expanding

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social orbit. That orbit now includes four young Spanish women from an international trade fair situated in Barcelona: the aforementioned Marta together with Aurora, Montserrat, and Greta.

Not accidentally, all of these characters, the Spaniards in addition to the Americans, are engaged in selling of some sort—even Fred, whose job is to "sell" the Sixth Fleet to the native population and whose previous job was with Shearson-Lehman Brothers in the States. Stillman's real interest in the film is the Americans, how the foreign setting helps to make certain characteristics of the American superclass, and the American superpower, stand out. But the fact that he portrays Spanish women who are as absorbed in beautiful surfaces as the American men, and who enthusiastically embrace free-market capitalism as exported by the United States, tells us that the European setting is not so foreign as it may appear, that the peace which concludes the Cold War in 1991 will in actuality be a Pax *Americana*. Moreover, the fact that Stillman makes his two main characters a sales rep and an advance man is itself telling. After all, these are supposed to be representatives of the oxymoronic American aristocracy. And so they are, but they represent that aristocracy in its extended decline, which began around the time of the First World War.

In its slow eclipse, the American upper class resembles the British aristocracy under Charles II, which was increasingly driven to exchange idle pursuits for business ones and sexual license for sexual discretion, or Puritanical affectation, in a country more and more dominated by middle-class mercantilism and morality. Articulate speech, or the expression of wit through the making of puns, similes, and metaphors, was for these aristos less a delightful way to kill time than a desperate means to display their intellectual, hence social, superiority, if not to use it in the quest for riches. The literate exchanges between Ted and Fred in *Barcelona*, as well as the occasional voice-over narration of the more introspective Ted—on such Large Questions as outer vs. inner beauty, the benevolence vs. the malevolence of American foreign policy, religious devotion vs. worldly success—seem similarly designed to assert their verbal skills in a world where preppie social graces have little currency and the accumulation of wealth alone leads to dullness if not vulgarity. Like that of Restoration rakes, the dialogue of these American sparks comes fitted out with similes, metaphors, and artistic referents. Ted and Fred are closer to wit-woulds than genuine wits, however, in the former's use of salesmanship as a metaphor for life, his allusion to the purportedly anti-capitalistic *Death of a Salesman*, plus his equation of religion with self-advancement as he studies the Bible concealed within a copy of *The Economist*; and in the latter's comparison of American intervention abroad with the squashing by a black-ant democracy of red-ant tyranny, his use of shaving against the grain or with it as a metaphor for life's twin options, and his allusion to *The Graduate* as a moral lesson in (female) marital infidelity.

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Infidelity and promiscuity are much on the minds of these two young men, as they are on the minds of the otherwise libertine women of Restoration comedy, who feel they must affect virtue in order to avoid censure from an encroaching bourgeoisie that in 1650 passed laws making adultery and fornication capital crimes. Ted, for example, appears stunned at the admission by young Spanish women that they can enjoy sex with men whom they do not love, yet he climbs into bed with Montserrat after knowing her for only a short time. And he selects her over the far less attractive Aurora despite his earlier determination to eschew shallowly pretty women for homely girls of substance. Ted himself is co-opted by middle-class morality, then, which he unwittingly affects in the twilight-time of his own class and even gender, the last decade of the Cold War, when America's patriarchal elitism was under attack at home as well as abroad as never before. To suggest this twilight aurally, Stillman twice uses the pop song "Twilight Time" (sung in Spanish!) on the soundtrack, most revealingly at the very end in a shot of Fred and Ted in their youth fishing off a dock on Lake Michigan as the sun goes down; to suggest visual eclipse, Stillman frequently finishes scenes with a quick fade to black in addition to filming an unusual number of nighttime sequences in so lushly sunny a city as Barcelona.

Shortly after Fred's arrival in Barcelona, Ted takes his cousin on an evening tour of the city, but both men seem more interested in checking out its lovely female sights. Along with those sights, they are met with graffiti excoriating Yankee pigs and roving teenagers who shout "Americans are Fascists!" Nonetheless, the trade-fair girls, who show up in a car, invite the boys to a costume party. There Fred hooks up with Marta and Ted is introduced not only to Montserrat but also to Ramón, a political journalist and fellow beauty-worshiper with whom she lives in an open relationship. The anti-American Ramón becomes the jingoistic Fred's antagonist, not Ted's, despite the fact that the latter soon invites Montserrat to move in with him. She almost does but hesitates at Fred's fabrication that Ted wants to spend the rest of his life with her—the same Fred who continuously borrows pesetas from his friend and otherwise lives off his hospitality. Meanwhile, the local USO is bombed, and this bombing, unlike the earlier ones, kills somebody: an American sailor over whose coffin Fred must officiate in a dockside ceremony before the body is shipped home. It is here, where you might think that Stillman's sharply observed comedy will turn maudlin, that this director-screenwriter reveals his mettle and his measure. First, we don't know and never even get to see the man who was killed; second, the short service is held in a warehouse filled with crates; and third, the entire scene is photographed in medium-to-full shot (not emotional close-up) from the point of view of the anonymous forklift operator who comes to take the coffin away as Taps plays! *Barcelona* has darkened, it's true, but paradoxically the film has accomplished this with comic lightness, for

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social and political dissection is its goal, not moral and ontological breast-beating.

Ramón the newspaper man goes on to write an article putting forward his theory that the "AFL-CIA" itself arranged the USO bombing, and naming Fred as a likely CIA agent. The Spanish journalist acts not only on his own (incorrect) hunch, but also on a tip from Fred's girlfriend Marta, who has been stealing money from Ted in addition to telling lies about, and cheating on, her man. But in the end even she is accorded coolly comic treatment by Stillman, who has this character declare that she will enter a convent as soon as she can get together the money she needs in order to flee the worldly life! Fred is more or less unruffled by Marta's betrayal, partly because he has his eye on Montserrat, partly because Spanish terrorists have their eye on him and he knows it. Two of them finally catch up with him as he rides along in a taxi one day, and they shoot Fred from a passing motor scooter. He is hospitalized with such a serious wound that he remains unconscious for days, during which time Ted—who feels a combination of great remorse over having kicked the freeloading Fred out of his apartment and great anxiety over the possibility that he may lose his job to the less distracted Dickie Taylor—penitently reads aloud from *The Scarlet Pimpernel* to the only cousin he has in the voguish belief that the sound of a familiar voice will help a comatose patient to recover. He is joined by Greta, an angelic trade-fair girl who hasn't figured much in the action up to now, and who vigilantly reads to Fred from *War and Peace*.

Fred recovers from his gunshot wound—comically, as his left eye opens in response to one of Ted's prayers of *mea culpa* and he retorts, "Give me a break." Ted discovers that he is in reality not being dismissed from his job but promoted and sent back to Chicago. Fred returns to his job preparing for the much-anticipated arrival of the Sixth Fleet. And he and his cousin reconcile their differences on the day of Ted's marriage to Greta, which is also the day of Ramón's apology to Fred, Fred's teaming up with Montserrat, and the U.S. Consul's quasi-divine dispensation of high spirits among all the celebrants. This is a comedy, after all, in which everything must be set to rights at the end, including in the penultimate scene the return of both Ted and Fred to America. There, on the sunny and green shore of Lake Michigan, the boys enjoy a cookout followed by some kayaking with Greta and Montserrat. The feeling left by *Barcelona*, however, is not so sunny and green, not so comic and life-affirming. The boys seem for now to have retreated rather than merely gone home to America, where their particular act plays a little better, a little less obstreperously, than it does in Europe, even as America will begin to question why it should not retreat from the world—from its role as the world's benefactor-cum-guardian—after the fall of its Soviet nemesis. For republican America's imperial presence on the world scene, spreading democracy as it were and capitalism as it is, has

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always seemed to many so hypocritical—and now seems so superfluous—that a little isolationism, or a lot less bullying, may be in order.

So imperial is America's presence on the world *film* scene, in this case not in an American-made film exported abroad but in one shot in a foreign country for consumption mainly at home, that *Barcelona* features Americans, or in any event non-Spaniards, in roles intended for natives of Spain: Mira Sorvino (Marta), Tushka Bergen (Montserrat), and Hellena Schmied (Greta). Each coolly speaks a broken English that nicely complements the brittle, almost removed, literateness of Taylor Nichols and Chris Eigeman in the roles of Ted and Fred. Nichols appeared as the sputtering-stuttering philosopher Charlie, Eigeman as the charming ironist-egotist Nick in *Metropolitan*, and Stillman has retained his cinematographer (John Thomas), editor (Christopher Tellefsen), and musical director (Mark Suozzo) from his first film, so it looks as if he's trying to assemble a team that will ensure his artistic independence over the long haul. If you have such a team or company—which most American film directors don't—you can make a *Metropolitan* for $300,000 and a *Barcelona* for $4 million (still relatively cheap). Would that there were more American *auteurs* like Whit Stillman, who wishes to reach a wide audience yet at the same time makes only the films he wants to make and retains complete artistic control over them.

Despite the fact that he's from Cuba, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea himself appears to make only the movies he wants to make and to retain complete artistic control over them. The country's foremost director and a committed supporter of the Communist revolution, Gutiérrez Alea has nonetheless frequently used his films either to satirize the flaws and stupidities of Castro's regime or to treat sympathetically those Cubans who have been marginalized by their own government. *Death of a Bureaucrat* (1966), for instance, darkly ridicules the Kafkaesque bureaucracy of postrevolutionary Cuba, while *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968) explores the soul-searching alienation of a bourgeois intellectual who chooses to remain in Castro-country rather than flee his beloved Havana for Miami. The newly released *Strawberry and Chocolate*, though not without its comic moments, is essentially a serious, compassionate consideration of homosexual life—and heterosexual response to that life—in a country not known for its tolerance of "alternative lifestyles."

Even as *Barcelona* is set during the last decade of the Cold War, *Strawberry and Chocolate* takes place in 1979, prior to the Mariel boatlift and the onset of the AIDS-epidemic, and during a cold war between America and Cuba that today still shows no signs of letting up. Orlando Jiménez Leal, a once-banned Cuban director now living in New York, and Mario García Joya, the cinematographer for this film who was recently granted political asylum in the United States, have argued that *Strawberry and Chocolate* is a "safe," even slyly propagan-

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distic film about homosexuality from the Cuban government's point of view, since it deals with discrimination or intolerance in the past, *after* the shutting down of Cuba's concentration camps for gays and *before* Mariel as well as AIDS (plus AIDS-quarantining), and since it shows a heterosexual man and devoted Marxist overcoming his aversion to homosexuals if not embracing homosexuality itself. But Gutiérrez Alea's latest work also depicts a gay man who is driven to defect, presumably to the United States, less because he rejects Communism (which he in fact toasts with the words "Long live democratic Communism") than because Communism rejects him by denying his kind a fulfilling emotional and professional life. To be sure, *Strawberry and Chocolate* isn't "simplistic, anti-Communist propaganda," either, which is the countercharge that Gutiérrez Alea made against *Improper Conduct* (1983), a documentary by Jiménez Leal and the late expatriate cinematographer Néstor Almendros about Havana's official campaign of harassment against homosexuals. "Art is one thing and propaganda another," the gay Diego himself declares in Gutiérrez Alea's film, and *Strawberry and Chocolate* comes down subtly on the side of art by avoiding the shrill oversimplifications of the factual *Improper Conduct*, on the one hand, and the sentimental equivocations of the fictional (and Brazilian-generated) *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985), on the other.

Gutiérrez Alea had the Cuban writer Senel Paz adapt the screenplay for *Strawberry and Chocolate* from one of his own short stories. The focus here, as in *Barcelona*, is on the relationship between two men, but as they mix with the "foreignness" in each other rather than with foreign women. There is no overt foreign presence in this film, because ever since Castro took over the Cubans have resisted the Americanization of their culture, which is not to say the total rejection of American goods. Ever since Castro, the Cubans have also naturally resisted the division of people into social classes, the goal being a dictatorship of the proletariat if not a totally classless society. The Teds and Freds of America, of the world, have been banished from Havana; what remain are the true believers, like David, and those like Diego who are true after a fashion.

Strawberry and Chocolate opens with just the right kind of tease—or rather two of them. David, a political science student at Havana University and ardent Communist, takes his girlfriend Vivian to a cheap hotel to make love for the first time. Upon seeing her (crocodile) tears, however, the noble David announces that he won't sleep with her until they are married, to which the startled young woman's only response is "What?" He is then devastated when, in the very next scene, the enterprising Vivian marries another man. Alone with his thoughts, David has an ice cream—chocolate—to console himself at Havana's open-air Coppelia ice cream parlor. Enter the flauntingly gay Diego, an artist-intellectual who sits down at the same table with a strawberry ice cream and eventually takes the student

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militant back to his apartment on the pretext of showing him some photographs. Conditioned as we have been by pat movies like *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, we are sure that David will succumb to Diego's advances, despite his professed revulsion toward "fags" or because his disappointment in women will tap the homosexuality that many gays believe is latent in all heterosexuals. We are happily disappointed: not for lack of trying, Diego fails to lure his man into bed.

What he does lure the uncultured David into is a kind of dialectical relationship founded on intelligent conversation and gracious living. "I'm a dialectical materialist," declares David as Diego serves him, first Indian tea in Sèvres china cups, then American Scotch whiskey in a tumbler; "I'm religious," responds Diego in an apartment that, despite housing a small shrine to the Virgin Mary, reveals his religion to be art more than Catholicism. Religious sculpture by his gay friend Germán clutters his home, as do works of literature, photographs of artists, and posters from movies; literary references fill his conversation—to John Donne as well as homosexuals like Wilde, Gide, Lorca, and the suppressed Cuban novelist José Lezama Lima; and beautiful music fills the air, whether composed by Verdi or by Ignacio Cervantes, whom the Spaniards drove out of Cuba on account of his homosexuality.

Wary of Diego's gayness, David is nevertheless drawn to his "salon," though ostensibly he continues to visit the place in order to gather evidence against his "counterrevolutionary" acquaintance, as his dormitory roommate and the Castro minion Miguel has strongly advised him to do. But Diego is no counterrevolutionary, as David learns: he doesn't disbelieve in the Communist revolution, just in its exclusion of gays. Similarly, David is finally neither latently homosexual nor persecutorily homophobic, as Diego learns: in fact he's a heterosexual virgin who aspires to write fiction, and who aids in his own artistic-intellectual development by reading some of Diego's books instead of only those on the prescribed list of the Communist Youth League. David loses his virginity, or better gives his heart, neither to Diego nor to Vivian, but rather to an older woman, Diego's friend and neighbor Nancy. Supposedly the Neighborhood Vigilance Officer, Nancy operates a thriving black market, has her fortune told by a Santeria priest, and regularly attempts suicide. So much for her being the local guardian of revolutionary fervor!

Even as Nancy is not nearly so doctrinaire as the Party thinks she is, David is not so doctrinaire as *he* thinks he is, and Diego is more faithful to Marxist doctrine than anyone would have thought. Because he writes a letter to Cuban authorities protesting the banning of his planned exhibition of Germán's work, however, Diego is pressured to leave the country. Before he does so he takes a farewell tour of Havana with his friend, at the end of which they return to the Coppelia café. There David has the strawberry ice cream—what he had earlier termed the "gay flavor"—and Diego the chocolate; there

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they heartily embrace for the first time to the strains of Cervantes' rueful "Farewell to Cuba," which has recurred like a leitmotif throughout the film; and there, in response to Diego's playful assertion that the only thing wrong with the beautiful David is his heterosexuality, David admits that "nobody's perfect" in an unconscious yet felicitous echo of the closing line from *Some Like It Hot*.

"Nobody's perfect" might be glossed as "everybody's different" for this film, for *Strawberry and Chocolate* is neither an exclusive endorsement of homosexuality nor a total condemnation of Communist ideology. Rather, it's a paean to human complexity and a plea for tolerance of that complexity or diversity, especially in a country like Cuba that has all the enemies it needs and therefore ought not to be creating imaginary ones within its own borders. Homosexuality in *Strawberry and Chocolate* is a metaphor for difference or otherness, for *heterodoxy*, just as Communism in the film could be said to be a metaphor for uniformity or unanimity, for *homogeneity*. As for the argument made by gay activists that the swishy, artsy Diego is an offensive stereotype, I say that "stereotypical" does not mean "untrue." Here, Diego's effeminacy is meant, not to degrade him, but rather to make him stand out from the crowd, to underline his otherness; the fact that he does not suppress that effeminacy in a society as repressive as Cuba's is a sign of his courage or manliness, not of his weakly, "womanish" ways.

Like Gutiérrez Alea, who calls himself "a man who makes criticism inside the revolution, who wants to ameliorate the process, . . . not to destroy it," Diego wants new life pumped into an aging regime "collapsing in shit," and he happens to think it can come from homosexual artists as well as politicians. But he is wise enough to know that Cuba needs new *voices*, not simply a single new voice to replace Castro's superannuated one. While playing a Maria Callas record for David, Diego asks, "Why can't we produce voices like that? We can't always listen to María Remola" (an aged singer who, like her leader, refuses to retire). The call for Castro to retire comes visually, not verbally: in the entrance to Diego's apartment building, a crumbling *palacio* from the days of Spanish colonialism, a huge mural of Fidel is flaking off the wall—a disintegrating reign thus superimposed on an *ancien régime*.

The decaying state of Castro's rule is faintly suggested by García Joya's cinematography, which employs a mostly static camera in the middle-to-full range to photograph the Cuban capital in quiet colors that are sometimes transmuted into sepia tones. As for the Cuban people, they are colorfully represented by Jorge Perrugoría as Diego and Mirta Ibarra, Gutiérrez Alea's wife, as Nancy. Vladimir Cruz is not as colorful as these two in the more difficult role of David, but color is not what his character calls for. Cruz is truthful to, not sentimental about, David's combination of utter seriousness and

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striking naïveté, and therefore he is able to convince us of the truth of David's change in sentiment toward Diego.

Both Diego and David are truly critical of American imperialism, but frequently in a comic way, as the following exchange reveals:

David: Truman Capote dropped the A-bomb.
Diego: Truman Capote, never! He was a homosexual!

Barcelona shares their comic criticism of American foreign policy and, equally comically, equates that policy with phallic aggressiveness as opposed to gyno-gay pacifism. Witness this remark by Fred: "I think it's well known that anti-Americanism has its roots in sexual impotence, at least in Europe." The difference between the couples Fred and Ted and Diego and David is the difference between comic pathos and comic edification: the latter learn something about themselves and each other, whereas the former plainly do not.

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DEAN FLOWER

A Fine and Private View

WHAT PLACE IS LEFT FOR SERIOUS NOVELS? An occasional Toni Morrison or Anne Tyler reaches the best-seller list, but the majority of readers still feed on those fat romance-spy-drug-sex thrillers. What's worse, the old respect that novels once had has been deeply undercut by film and televisual substitutes. Why read Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* or Josephine Humphreys' *The Fireman's Fair* when you can rent perfectly good videos of the film versions? For the price of an average hardcover novel, you can see at least ten entertaining videocassettes—a few of which might even be artful. Why slog through *Martin Chuzzlewit* when "Masterpiece Theater" lets you view it in four compact installments? Soon, given the proliferation of multimedia computers, there will be pixilated fiction of some sort to view on CD ROM or do-it-yourself "interactive" narratives on the Internet—only mouse clicks away. Why go to all the trouble and expense of reading complex, demanding novels, done up in old-fashioned print? And why take the special risks of reading recent fiction, so much of which seems to evaporate in a month or two?

Anita Brookner's latest novel gives an eloquent answer to these gloomy questions.[1] It does what serious fiction continues to do best, that is, to take us deeply into the mind of a complex character, and to embody his consciousness—whatever its flux of emotions and thoughts may be—in language. Unlike film and television which may show us the face of suffering or provide visual metaphors for subjectivity, the language of fiction allows us to know that suffering, or to enter that subjectivity, immediately. It gives us a private view. Even when the protagonist's mind is inarticulate (Faulkner's Benjy) or rudimentary (Stein's Melanctha), the language that represents it can be richly poetic, subtle, and complex. Brookner prefers sensitive, modest, thoughtful narrators; they are never geniuses or dauntingly smart or paragons of introspection. They are all-too-human, ridden by doubts and second thoughts, capable of great self-understanding (which often comes too late) but rarely of any liberating changes in themselves. They are mainly spectators in life, more acted upon than acting, never aggressive, which may be the reason some critics find them "limited" and complain of the "sameness" of Brookner's novels. But what she relishes—and what I am saying modern fiction does

[1] A PRIVATE VIEW, by *Anita Brookner*. Random House. $23.00.

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best—is to articulate the actions of a person's mind, moment by moment, conveying the very texture of human self-awareness.

Brookner is out to prove that the minds of her characters can be exceptionally interesting, and affecting, no matter how bland they may seem from the outside. So—defying her critics—she names her protagonist George Bland. A disappointed man in his sixties, Bland has just retired from a routine job in London and is at loose ends. His best friend—a man with whom Bland expected to share his latter years—has died suddenly. His other longtime friend is Louise, a woman he could never quite feel passionate about although they were lovers once; but she is too much like him—conventional, decent, and prosaic. Vague romantic desires stir in him sometimes: "he was after some stronger emotion," "some part of him . . . [was] waiting to be ignited, consumed." But he keeps such desires—like everything else in his life—at a safe aesthetic distance. Enter the tawdry Katy Gibb, who tries to play Daisy Miller to Bland's Winterbourne. But Katy is no innocent girl: she is greedy, brash, and dishonest. She freeloads in the apartment next door while the owners are on vacation, having tricked Bland into giving her a key. She uses Bland at every opportunity, deploying cheap cosmetics one day and self-righteous anger the next.

Bland sees through Katy Gibb at once and is appalled, but he yields to her every demand. The interesting question, and he asks it often of himself, is why does he? Partly he is flattered by such a young woman's attention. Partly he is too well-mannered to say no. And he has plenty of time and money, with little else to do. But the deeper reason is that he's frankly "stimulated by *the sight* of the girl's appetites." Note the Jamesian phrasing here, italics mine. "He wanted, he thought, *to study* her further." "Her cheeks were no longer an angry and, he thought, *rather splendid* red . . ." There's a taint of perversity in these recognitions, which Bland does not yet sense. He sees her dolled up as "a work of art," or without make-up as an "empty canvas." It even occurs to him once that "she might be a slut." Whatever this might reveal about Katy, it tells us much more about Bland. And that after all is the focus of the novel: the shock that she is to his system, the disruptive "private view" she gives him of himself.

One such shock comes in a moment of overpowering anger, when Bland realizes that he would like to wring Katy's neck. Then he refines that, chillingly: "What he suspected now, and it made his heart beat faster, was the fact that in visiting some kind of violence on her, in actually manhandling her flesh, he might experience a powerful erotic satisfaction." This produces still another unwanted recognition, that the vital element that has always been missing in his carnal life is hostility. "The knowledge hit him like a stone hurled by an unseen assailant." Brookner is at her most masterful in such devastating moments. You feel all Bland's horror at himself, and the heady rush of his darkest impulses: he would like to throw off inhibitions, "even virtue," and be at one with the gods, "those ancient heedless gods,"

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pagan, hedonistic, and selfish. Brookner does not offer any comment, not even an ironic nudge, yet one senses that her detachment is compassionate. Who would have thought that George Bland would be brought to these depths? The fascination is in seeing him get there, watching it all happen from the inside, and wondering where he might be capable of going next. Brooknerian suspense is wonderful, depending as it does on such complicated and risky self-exploration. I rank this book, along with *Dolly* and *A Closed Eye*, as her very best work.

Another master of the private view is William Trevor, whose most recent novel is stretched on a much larger canvas than Brookner's.[2] Trevor's story shifts between points of view, chiefly those of a pregnant unmarried Irish girl, Felicia, and a corpulent English hypocrite, Mr. Hilditch, who pretends to help her. Earlier versions of Felicia may be found in "Kathleen's Field" (story, 1989) and "Reading Turgenev" (nouvelle, 1991), grim tales of female abuse in some very nasty Irish families. Felicia tries to escape all that—tyrant father, cloddish brothers, merciless community, punitive church—by coming to England in search of her seducer, Johnny. But he remains in hiding, having betrayed more than Felicia by joining the English army. Instead of the "lover" she hopes for, Felicia meets the loathsome Mr. Hilditch—although she is too innocent to recognize his oily perversity. Pretending sympathy, he steals her money, then offers her a place to stay. You know at once that he has done this sort of thing before. A serial killer, the dust jacket tells us, showing a lurid photo of rumpled women's clothing in a dark street.

But Trevor is not Patricia Highsmith, and Hilditch is not the talented Mr. Ripley. When the story begins to linger in Hilditch's point of view, not Felicia's, his monstrosity lessens. Trevor makes us see his pathetic lies, his squeamishness and privacy, his frail ego, his miserable memories of a promiscuous mother and boyhood humiliations, his sexual fright, his favorite rituals of consolation—food and music—and his deepest hungers: "Each time he hoped that a friendship would last forever, that two people could be of help to one another . . ." Hilditch is evil all right, but also terribly human and pathetic, as helpless in his way as Felicia is in hers.

In fact the novel suggests repeatedly that individuals are powerless, driven by social and biological forces beyond anyone's control. Between the merciless pressures of Felicia's Ireland—a community that will certainly crush her—and the merciless indifference of Hilditch's England, represented by an anonymous city in the industrial Midlands where nobody much cares about anybody else, there is little to choose. Felicia might as well be, like Dreiser's Sister Carrie, "a waif amid forces"; Hilditch with his American records might as well be

[2] FELICIA'S JOURNEY, by *William Trevor*. Viking. $21.95.

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Frank Norris' McTeague, playing the same five tunes on his mandolin every night. Never before has Trevor been so sociological as this:

> "I'll go for a Kentucky," someone passing by on the pavement says. "I'd rather a Kentucky."
>
> Cartons are thrown down outside the Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Colonel Sanders is reassuring in the window, his honest gaze, his white goatee, Finger Lickin' Good. The voice of Sheena Easton on a ghetto-blaster is drowned by Michael Jackson's. Bright neon sparkles: *Coca-Cola is a Way of Life*, it says in the sky.

Note the heavy contempt. Normally Trevor would jump from one character's head to another, but this time he allows frequent lapses into the impersonal or the purely documentary. At any point he may drop the pretense of Felicia's point of view to describe a Blakean landscape ("Factories seem like fortresses, their towers protecting an ancient realm of iron and wealth") or to deliver an essay on the plight of street people ("Already, hours ago, the homeless of this town have found their night-time resting places . . ."). In another scene we have no human observer at all, only a prowling cat and a dead man. The novel has an edge of stridency and impatience unprecedented in Trevor's fiction. He conjures up a Jamaican black woman, the born-again Miss Calligary, to be a gadfly to Mr. Hilditch, pestering him with zealous pamphlets and questions. But the characterization fizzles because Trevor makes her a symptom, not a person. He has a message to convey, a rhetorical purpose that overrides his usual patient curiosity about people. It comes to this: there are no moral or spiritual guides for either Felicia or Mr. Hilditch. There is the wacky hit-or-miss fundamentalism of Miss Calligary, or else the sham values of modern industrial capitalism—that "Coca-Cola is a Way of Life." Curiously, it is the awful Mr. Hilditch who in the end commands our deepest respect. Two people were supposed to help one another, he knew that. Seeing him from the inside, we know why his suffering becomes more than he can bear.

It is harder to be moved by J. M. Coetzee's inside view of Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg*, but the novel has passages of uncanny power and interest.[3] The daring idea—a writer's challenge, clearly—is to imagine the exiled Dostoevsky of 1869, a famous figure by this time but troubled by gambling and marital problems, drawn guiltily back to St. Petersburg by the death of his twenty-two-year-old stepson, Pavel, whom he hardly knew. He comes to mourn for Pavel, and for his own failures as a father, but quickly loses control. He becomes obsessive about the boy, occupying his shabby room, smelling his clothes, growing enamored of the landlady who protected him,

[3] THE MASTER OF PETERSBURG, by *J. M. Coetzee*. Viking. $21.95.

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trying to win over her young daughter whom Pavel befriended, getting entangled with the radical reformers and fanatics that Pavel knew, casting suspicion upon himself with the police. Coetzee is a master of political fables, but it would be a mistake to abstract one here. His purpose is more complicated, and disinterested: to imagine the mind of Dostoevsky the novelist, just before he wrote *The Possessed.* This is less a linear narrative than a compendium of motivational paradoxes, of emotions no sooner performed than questioned, of ideas reversed and turned inside out, of desires indulged recklessly and then suspected, of desires rejected and then foolishly indulged. Coetzee manages to portray this paradoxical mind, with its oddly aggressive passivity and chameleonic susceptibility, convincingly well. Who after all does not imagine Dostoevsky as something of a Dostoevskian character?

But there is the problem. Coetzee has such a tough act to follow. How can we not measure his success against Dostoevskian models? There is Maximov the cagey police interrogator, Sonya the tenement-mother-prostitute, Matryona the innocent possessed by a demon, Nachaev the fell opponent who foreknows every move. There are guilty moments of getting rid of things—incriminating clothing, an illicit gun—that become nightmarish public displays. There is the destitute Ivanov, an alter ego who shadows Dostoevsky and is killed. There is the compulsive gambler, and the quarreler with God. Even when these materials are plausible they smack of parody. And then the comparison suggests what's painfully missing, beyond Coetzee's reach: the rhetorical extravagance, the crowded scenes, the wild irruptions of humor. Coetzee is such an austere writer, trying in this novel to be another sort. He almost succeeds, but I kept wishing that once at least something funny would happen—the appearance, say, of an unauthorized pimple on someone's nose.

Orhan Pamuk takes his reader on a different sort of interior journey, into the labyrinths of Istanbul and the puzzles of modern Turkish identity.[4] It is not an easy trip, partly because Pamuk's sentences are long, crowded with details, interruptions, and slangy riffs, and partly because the narrative is beset by reflexivity and regression. But once you get past the initial difficulties, the experience is extraordinary. Pamuk's narrator is Galip, a young lawyer whose wife, Rüya, an addict of mystery stories, has unaccountably vanished. Then Galip discovers that his cousin Jelal, an influential newspaper columnist whom he greatly admires, has disappeared as well. In fact Rüya is also Galip's cousin, Jelal's half-sister. Galip begins to look for them both, feeling like a poor parody of a detective at first until he hits upon the Borgesan strategy of re-reading Jelal's old columns for clues. The reader must do the same, since every other chapter consists

[4] THE BLACK BOOK, by *Orhan Pamuk.* Trans. from the Turkish by *Güneli Gün.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $25.00.

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of a column written by Jelal. Galip comes to know the style so well that eventually he starts writing columns himself, submitting them in his cousin's name, and nobody is the wiser. This leaves the reader wondering whether Galip might in fact have written *all* of the columns in the book, or whether Jelal has not in effect "written" the character that Galip becomes as the book progresses.

Indeed, the central issue of the book concerns who, or what, constitutes the individual self. Someone asks Jelal, "Is there a way a man can be only himself?" The question comes to obsess him: he tries to shake off the role that popular journalism has created for him; he claims to detect a parallel universe shadowing this one, governed by a secret sect whose codes and signs may be only the figments of his own imagination, his own desire for difference. Galip meanwhile blames Jelal as the usurper of his own identity: "You are the reason why I could never be myself. . . . You are the reason I believed in all these fictions which managed to turn me into you." Emulation runs rampant in this novel; mannikins and actors and their unwitting imitators are everywhere; derivative fashions and gestures define them all. In one particularly Dantean scene Galip goes with friends into a subterranean museum of Turkish history, filled with effigies:

> They saw film actors who could not be themselves playing movie heroes who could not be themselves, because they could neither be themselves nor anyone else, and they saw the Turkish superstars and actors who simply play themselves. They saw the poor bewildered souls who dedicate their entire lives to translations and adaptations in order to bring home Western arts and sciences, and they saw the dreamers who die and whose grave sites are obliterated before any of their dreams come true, who have worked their entire lives with magnifying glass in hand in order to turn the jumble of streets in Istanbul into the linden-lined streets of Berlin, or the boulevards of Paris radiating outward like a star, or the bridged avenues of St. Petersburg. . . .

Despite such visions of sameness the novel teems with oddities ancient and modern, with spin-off stories, endless parables, and madly repeating details. Its air of surreality comes from a lavish realism, not from its introspective narrators. Among its many fabulous settings, my favorite is Aladdin's Store, which sells a little bit of everything—Tom Mix comics, tricolored shoelaces, pornography, cigarettes, pink backgammon dice, plaster of Paris statuettes of Atatürk with blue light bulbs for eyes—catering to all the fads and whims of demotic Istanbul. Among the novel's plethora of collateral figures, I liked especially Master Bedii, the mannikin maker. He is a great artist of the Turkish figure, a fastidious and passionate craftsman, but an utter failure with the public because his mannikins are not the stylized skinnies of Paris and New York. Nobody wants to be reminded of

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what they *really* look like. Humor of course is not the prevailing tone of this pointedly "black book"; savage indignation might describe it better; but Pamuk has an inventive exuberance that dazzles and delights, canceling out all the grimness.

I wish I could say the same about Salman Rushdie's latest work.[5] The dust jacket proclaims it "his first major work of fiction since *The Satanic Verses*," which is not only unfair to that ebullient fable, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, but an outright lie about the present book. It is in plain fact an uneven collection of nine stories, somewhat miscellaneous in manner, arranged to suggest more coherence and sequential design than it actually possesses. Plainly, Rushdie is casting about for new voices and methods, even while serving up some of the old-fashioned magic. In fables like "Good Advice Is Rarer than Rubies" and "The Free Radio" Rushdie uses alarmed and skeptical narrators who miss the point of their own tales. The cheerful irony of these entertainments can darken unexpectedly, however. The poor fool who gets himself sterilized, hoping for a free radio from the government and then pretending he has it, is remembered at the end for "the expression which came over his face in the days just before he learned the truth about his radio, and the huge mad energy which he had poured into the act of conjuring reality, by an act of magnificent faith, out of the hot thin air between his cupped hand and his ear." The sub-text here may be Rushdie's longing to recover the "huge mad energy" that once generated novels like *Shame* and *Midnight's Children*. But note how eloquent are the "hot thin air" and the "cupped hand."

Several of these stories run to excess, driven by feverish ingenuities and schemes that belittle their characters. "The Prophet's Hair" is a fable of greed that should have commented tellingly on religious fanaticism, but no character in it is interesting enough to justify all the violence and hyperbole. "Yorick" is literary stunt, a monologue in manuscript that revises *Hamlet* in the manner of a priapic Tristram Shandy, while "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella" is the leering story of a would-be explorer and the woman who must be taken to bed if he is to realize his dreams. Much more successful is the futuristic fable, "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers," where Dorothy's famous footwear from Oz are auctioned off and the world bids billions. The story begins flippantly, but grows increasingly sober and heartfelt. At the end Rushdie's narrator mulls over two lessons to be drawn from the demented auction, both about the invasive power of stories:

> In fiction's grip, we may mortgage our homes, sell our children, to have whatever it is we crave. Alternatively, in that miasmal ocean, we may simply float away from our desires, and see them anew,

[5] EAST, WEST, by *Salman Rushdie*. Pantheon. $21.00.

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> from a distance, so that they seem weightless, trivial. We let them go. Like men dying in a blizzard, we lie down in the snow to rest.

Fortunately for us Rushdie has not yielded to that impulse himself, although you feel something of his post-*fatwah* discouragement in the words.

The last three stories in the collection suggest that Rushdie may be ready to abandon *The Wizard of Oz* as his model, the film which he once said "made a writer of me." None of the final stories are fables; two of them have narrators that resemble Rushdie himself; all are set in modern England. "The Harmony of the Spheres" portrays the odd friendship of a disturbed English intellectual, Eliot, and his Indian school chum, an ambitious man whose mixed envy and admiration leads to sexual and racial betrayals. "Chekov and Zulu" has a comic veneer, but its two Indian friends—both undercover agents in London—disagree profoundly about their ultimate loyalties. The final story, "The Courter," sounds the most autobiographical and may be the best of all. The speaker remembers growing up in a big houseful of Indian emigrants, including his childhood *ayah* from Bombay who develops a romance with the building's porter, an old inarticulate East European. His speech is impaired by a stroke, hers by inept pronunciation so that her *p*'s become *f*'s or *c*'s. Hence she makes him "the courter." The narrator remembers being a callous teenager, hooked on sixties music and his own erotic needs, during this sad and tender courtship which comes to a painful end. The *ayah* falls ill, and her only cure is to return home to Bombay. Powerfully now the narrator recognizes that he has no such home, and no freedom either: "I, too, have ropes around my neck. I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that. East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, *choose, choose*." Here Rushdie seems to have found a new way to voice his own identity, without any simplifications or screens. He may too have found a new way to give depth and dignity to seemingly limited characters. The dim old porter trounces the narrator at chess, and when he teaches the *ayah* to play, she trounces him as well. May I moralize? By risking this private and unflattering view of himself, Rushdie reaps the largest rewards.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Reading Joseph Epstein

IN EARLY 1975 JOSEPH EPSTEIN BECAME EDITOR of *The American Scholar*, and, with his second issue, began to write a quarterly column under the name "Aristides." Aristides informed us that he would comment "from time to time . . . on matters of cultural and intellectual interest," also that he was in no way related to that Aristides whom the citizens of Athens, tired of hearing him referred to as "the Just," had ostracized. Mr. Epstein's plan to share this column with other contributors never materialized; he has now written about eighty such columns and seems not to worry about possible ostracism. His first collection of them, *Familiar Territory: Observations on American Life* (1979), was in due course succeeded by four subsequent ones, of which the book to hand is the latest.[1] Together they constitute a unique phenomenon in the final decade of our century: a writer who can take what lies to his hands—the materials of everyday life—and make these materials never less than interesting. There are surprisingly few contemporary prose writers about whom that statement could be made.

In the preface to his first collection of pieces Mr. Epstein places them in the tradition of the familiar essay, which he traces back to Addison and Steele in England and (much more interestingly, he would agree) to Montaigne. He says that the familiar essayist must have a point of view, must write about what a predecessor in this mode, Joseph Wood Krutch, defined as "subjects which are neither obviously momentous nor merely silly." The greatest pleasure in writing such an essay, Epstein admits, comes when a reader tells him that this or that particular one—about names or jokes, or hairstyles—says what that reader has always felt. Since I have read all of these essays, most of them more than once, I can testify to the truth of such felt correspondence. But aside from invoking the "universality" or "natural" character of the feelings raised by this or that piece, what is there to say about how familiarity breeds—in Epstein's own word—content?

One might start with something as important, though doubtless impossible to pin down, as the matter of readability. Mr. Epstein is

[1] WITH MY TROUSERS ROLLED: Familiar Essays, by *Joseph Epstein*. W.W. Norton & Co. $29.95. *Familiar Territory* was followed by three collections of essays, all of them in print and published by Norton: *The Middle of My Tether* (1983); *Once More Around the Block* (1987); and *A Line Out for a Walk* (1991).

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immensely readable, on the first time through and on subsequent readings. (Need one point out that it is extremely convenient for him to edit a magazine in which he is allowed to be familiar four times a year? Where else could he command such a regular venue for such reflections?) It may even be said of these essays, without being patronizing, that—as Kingsley Amis once remarked about the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett—their very forgettability makes them that much the more rereadable. One of Mr. Epstein's most amusing earlier ventures is titled "Penography" and tells the story of his relationship to penmanship, handwriting, fountain pens. I remembered little about it except for title and subject; upon rereading, it was as if for the first time, and delightful. Epstein's familiar essays don't have plots and don't develop arguments you're required to weigh, qualify, dissent from or agree with. They're like Shakespearean "trifles, light as air" that sometimes come to seem "strong as proofs of holy writ."

In *Pertinent Players* (one of his three collections of essays about other writers), Mr. Epstein has written well about Hazlitt, probably his most impressive precursor as a familiar essayist, and who addressed himself to the matter in an essay from *Table-Talk*, "On Familiar Style." In that essay, which contains as much good sense as has been written on the subject, Hazlitt says that the familiar style equally rejects "unmeaning pomp" and "low, cant phrases"; it doesn't throw words together but avails itself of the "true idiom of the language." To write in this "truly English style," he says

> is to write as any one would speak in common conversation who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity, setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes. . . . It does not follow that it is an easy thing to give the true accent and inflection to the words you utter, because you do not attempt to rise above the level of ordinary life and colloquial speaking.

Hazlitt also wrote an essay titled "On the Indian Jugglers," which Mr. Epstein once cited in an essay ("Balls-Up") where he confessed to his own addiction to the activity of juggling. Juggling, he says, is "the recreational equivalent of art for art's sake"; it is "Play, almost with a vengeance." It's natural then, to draw the analogy between the unnatural and difficult art of juggling and the art of giving a true accent or inflection to the words of a familiar essay. In both cases, the practitioner makes it look easy, like play that belies the practiced skill of its performance.

On occasion Hazlitt attempts a fairly broad ironic humor, as at the beginning of his famous essay, "On the Fear of Death," where he argues that, since he wasn't alive in the reign of George III, why should he regret not being alive in the world that will come after him? Here is the robust, good-sensical Hazlitt tone:

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> When Goldsmith, Johnson, Burke, used to meet at the Globe, when Garrick was in his glory, and Reynolds was over head and ears with his portraits, and Sterne brought out the volumes of *Tristram Shandy* year by year, it was without consulting me: I had not the slightest intimation of what was going on: the debates in the House of Commons on the American War, or the firing on Bunker's Hill, disturbed not me: yet I thought this no evil—I neither ate, drank, nor was merry, yet I did not complain: I had not then looked out into this breathing world, yet I was well; and the world did quite as well without me as I did without it.

This is perhaps a little too robust for Mr. Epstein, who in "Time on My Hands, Me in My Arms" (which explicitly mentions Hazlitt's essay) considers his middle age as the clock continues to tick:

> As for me, I have begun to conclude that I have the gift of perpetual middle age. I at any rate think it a gift. . . . I rather like being middle-aged. I feel in this regard like Henry James, who wrote to a friend: "I like growing old: fifty-six!—but I don't like growing *older*. I quite love my present age . . . But I don't keep it long enough—it passes too quickly." Just so. How to slow things down, that seems to me the question. Living all one's life in laundromats or listening to commencement addresses delivered by the prime minister of Sweden—a little time stopper I once underwent—doesn't seem to me quite the solution.

Hardly a novel idea, the wish to stop time, at least to slow it down, especially as we get older and time moves faster. But I'd never before thought of resorting to the extreme time-stopping strategy of catching Sweden's prime minister at a commencement address.

Mr. Epstein likes to crack wise, and he wouldn't think of resisting the impulse to make a joke out of a serious matter like mortality. He's plenty serious about writing books and essays, and though he spends as much time as possible reading and thinking, those activities should issue in writing of one's own ("Whenever I come across a politician or business executive who mentions that one of his hobbies is reading, I invariably mutter, so, too, is one of my hobbies reading—and another is breathing"). Or, inquiring into himself as a listener to serious music, he presents us with the following boast: "I have, to begin with, an astonishing musical memory—there is no piece of serious music, I have discovered, that I am incapable of misidentifying or forgetting altogether." As if that weren't enough to redefine the boast, he adds, "This power seems to grow on me." Such a discovery doesn't prevent himself from wishing—indeed probably makes the wish all the more poignant—that, should he be reincarnated, he would be transformed into the great, supremely literate music critic, Donald F. Tovey. (As an

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admirer of Tovey this side of idolatry, I salute Epstein's acumen and wish him good luck.)

One of Robert Frost's best slogans, by way of telling his students what to strive for, was "Common in Experience, Uncommon in Writing." As with previous collections, Epstein's subjects are invariably common ones—keeping a pet, anecdotes, cars, beards and other facial adornments, one's heroes, the question of vanity. But it's not obvious where the uncommonness in his writing lies. Partly in the titles, surely (the essay on beards is titled "Hair Piece"), but mainly in the way his style plays inventively about the surface of things. From an earlier collection, I remember an essay titled "About Face" which is, yes, about the human face and in particular about Mr. Epstein's version of such. Typically self-regarding, an unfriendly reader might say, of this writer who is always talking about himself. But something uncommon in writing is done with the common subject: "I have been told by different people at different times that I resemble the following odd cast of characters: the actors Sal Mineo, Russ Tamblyn, and Ken Berry, the scholar Walter Kaufmann, the assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, and a now-deceased Yorkshire terrier named Max." Sal Mineo crossed with Walter Kaufmann seems like enough; combined with Oswald and Max the terrier, the result is formidable, a really odd and pleasing creation. In the new volume Epstein is forthright and candid about his short haircut, undramatically brushed the same way he brushed it in college: "A friend recently likened my hair, in its immutability, to Astro Turf, which I took as a compliment." He can be recognized instantly as "the least likely man in America to show up in a ponytail."

Mr. Epstein is the scourge of trendiness, in hair and other styles. He even distrusts a moustache unless it was in place by about 1947 (Dean Acheson gets good marks for his), and he believes—sensibly, in my view—that "Too frequent changes in the arrangement of a man's facial hair make him slightly suspect." More than once he has characterized himself as happy with life in the slow lane. In the new collection "Nicely Out of It" nicely describes not only its hero's cultural status and sense of himself, but is a good example of how, in one of Mr. Epstein's improvisatory performances, one damn thing leads to another. He begins "Nicely Out of It" by wondering whether he was ever truly "with" it, with "life" in its "full and fine vibrancy." Quickly he concludes that the last time he experienced this state was at age seventeen, walking down the corridors of Senn High School in Chicago with a cashmere sweatered young lady at his side. He began to feel out of it, by his best calculations, roughly in 1966 (Epstein was then twenty-nine), when he failed to get on satisfactory terms with the New Student, with rock music lyrics, with sixties movies, with pot (the "good stuff" he kept passing up at parties). Since then, progressive stages of out-of-it-ness have left him having never seen an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, never having watched "L.A. Law" or Arsenio

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Hall, never attending the Whitney Museum Biennial. He finds himself not taking offense when a reviewer calls him "crankish" and "rearguard" and identifies being out of it with, importantly, being out of New York City. He doesn't mind that a bit; after all, think of what a with-it New York life might involve:

> Much time, I imagine, would have to be spent at art galleries and shows looking at many doubtless extraordinary, mostly extra-aesthetic objects. Evenings would find one at a vast variety of new restaurants, tucking into all sorts of dubious delicacies. Either before or after dining one would be expected to buzz off to the Brooklyn Academy of Music for an evening of interminable avant-garde opera or to an unpleasant play on a terrifying subject Off-Off-Broadway.

He might, he fears, even wind up wearing an earring. In Chicago, by contrast, the food of choice is Italian beef-and-sausage combination sandwiches and the cultural institutions (the Symphony, the Art Institute, the Lyric Opera), good as they are, are subordinate to the Chicago Bears, Bulls, Cubs, White Sox, and Blackhawks. As for new novels, he's really out of it, hasn't kept up with Roth, Bellow, Mailer, or Updike, nor with Ann Beattie, Joan Didion, or Gabriel García Márquez. (Too bad, I say, he has "taken a pass" on Updike's *Rabbit at Rest*, a book not to be missed.) He doubts that he could name twenty members of the United States Senate, where once he knew them all. When he picks up a newspaper he turns first to the obituaries.

So where does the man who is truly out of it end up? What are his loyalties, first principles, "positive values" as they used to say? What does he believe? Well,

> that honor is immitigable; that so, too, is dignity, despite the almost inherent ridiculousness of human beings; that one's life is a work of art, however badly botched, which can be restored and touched up here and there but not fundamentally changed; that, in connection with this, integrity includes coherence of personality; that elegance, where possible, is very nice, but there are many things more important than style, loyalty and decency among them; that a cello is a finer instrument than an electric guitar, and that a man ought to start out the day with a clean handkerchief.

Those truths, the really important ones, seem to him self-evident. But of course they would be intolerable, poured out in this way, if they had not been preceded by so many amusing pages of "negative" stuff, the stuff of Epstein's humorous play.

Never very far from the center of any Epstein familiar essay is a sense of what he calls "the capriciousness of language," that sense that makes him one of our liveliest critics of words. I can't begin to express

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the pleasure I've received from a sentence he quotes (in "Toys in the Attic") from a student who wrote that "Madame Bovary's problem was that she couldn't make love in the concrete." Some years back he reminded me that an all-but-forgotten journeyman catcher for the Boston Braves named Clyde Kluttz had "nomenclaturally . . . the worst of both worlds." All the more affecting then, when this wordman slightly lowers the verbal temperature and writes a splendid piece—the concluding one to the volume—about his mother.

Among the many interesting things he tells us about this woman of "no cultural pretensions," "very limited curiosity, except about people," and a less than intense concern about her son's literary career ("Having changed someone's diapers may tend to make you rather less impressed with him later in life"), is that, over the course of his growing up she asked so little of him: "I have no memory of my mother telling me to sit straight, go study, wear my galoshes, clean my plate, remember my gloves, mind my table manners, come in early, hang up my clothes, get a haircut, or any of the rest of the standard repertoire of mother-to-son communication that most boys undergo from the age of six until, defeated, they finally leave home in their early twenties." Mrs. Epstein assumed that her son would know these things on his own, and if he forgot his gloves on a cold day he might well remember them on the next cold one. I don't mean that Epstein treats his mother unhumorously; indeed he remarks that, in return for her lack of demands on him, he didn't ask much of her either "except a fairly high level of those services generally available, at great expense, at a very good hotel: dining at all hours, laundry and maid service, messages." As with writing about his boyhood in Chicago or about the shops and streets of Evanston where he has lived for years, Mr. Epstein has the fictionist's grasp of detail, of nuance, of the look and feel of things. Something like this unsentimental embrace of the real comes through movingly in the book's final paragraph, when he admits that from an outsider's viewpoint his mother and he didn't look to be intimate:

> In the conventional way, I suppose we weren't. We were instead beyond intimacy. We were at that stage of affection where we understood each other without having to explain much, where we knew we could rely on each other without any qualification, where we loved each other so much that we didn't have to display our love in outward endearments.

At this moment the familiar essay sounds a note beyond familiarity, and certainly nothing like an essay.

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DAVID MASON

Louis Simpson's Singular Charm

> They will send me off to Heaven
> when all I want is to live in the world.
> —"Searching for the Ox"

Louis Simpson was born in Jamaica in 1923, the son of a prominent lawyer and an aspiring opera singer whose family were Russian émigrés. Their marriage ended while Simpson was still in school. The boy who would become a Pulitzer Prize-winning American poet discovered only when he joined his mother in New York that her family were assimilated Jews. This is the rich and confusing identity Simpson has explored throughout his career. His childhood was that of a British colonial and public school boy, but he has adapted in adult life to cosmopolitan New York. His mobility and mixed heritage seem especially New World phenomena. At least one anthology of Caribbean poetry claims him for Jamaica, yet he is well known in the United States as the author of "American Poetry":

> Whatever it is, it must have
> A stomach that can digest
> Rubber, coal, uranium, moons, poems.
>
> Like the shark, it contains a shoe.
> It must swim for miles through the desert
> Uttering cries that are almost human.

Perhaps this little poem is as Pan-American as its author. In his long and productive career, Simpson has touched a main current of contemporary life, and just as often he has spoken of our evolving poetry.

Indeed, the outline of Simpson's life has something both archetypal and singular about it. His was the generation of poets tempered by World War II—an experience that may have helped them see through the cant of much contemporary criticism. They came of age as writers when postwar trauma had given way to—or had simply been overwhelmed by—suburban boom. They expressed poetry's alienation from that environment even as they moved into the university, creating a new kind of social assimilation for poets that was profound in its benefits and drawbacks. Many of these poets experienced the further alienation of divorce, the angry disruptions of the sixties, etc., and many of them abandoned meter and rhyme as they

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endured these social changes. Among poets, the deep effects of such developments are still debated.

But these facts cannot fully explain the peculiar charm of Simpson's best work. He continually frustrates literary categorization, standing with clear-eyed bemusement at the fringes of contradictory movements. A brief comparison of Simpson to his contemporaries reveals that he has marked out his own literary territory. Richard Wilbur and Anthony Hecht, poets close to Simpson's age who share his war experience, never abandoned traditional verse, and have made some of the finest postwar poems in English. They are now American poetry's elder statesmen, whereas two younger poets, Allen Ginsberg and John Ashbery, seem by contrast never to have grown up. Their prolific self-indulgence has resulted in poems that are alike mainly in their dullness. Listening to a recording of Ginsberg reading "Howl," I suddenly realized that he sounded as monotonous as a Conehead from the old "Saturday Night Live." Ashbery is capable of charm, but so often displays his indifference to the audience that any sensible reader would respond with a like indifference. The one time I heard Ashbery read (to a weirdly adoring hometown crowd in Rochester, New York), I wondered whether the poet would nod off before I did. The grossly inflated reputations of Ashbery and Ginsberg loom over contemporary American poetry; one can only hope that withering time will reduce their trunkloads of published work to chapbooks worthy of the art.

Simpson is unlike any of these poets because he writes coherent narratives in free verse. Neither a seer nor, finally, a traditional maker, Simpson writes out of a prose sensibility much like Chekhov's, noting the comic absurdity and pathos of ordinary lives. Comparing him to still more poets born in the 1920s—Donald Justice, Donald Hall, Adrienne Rich, James Wright, Galway Kinnell, Robert Bly, etc.—only illustrates again how Simpson, while very much of his time, remains apart. To write about his life, one must also address his work, and the most significant aspect of that has been the development of his own contradictory attitudes toward forms of expression.

Simpson's rejection of meter must be placed in this historical context. While Wilbur, Hecht and others continued to make durable poems as best they knew how, a whole range of writers found meter incompatible with their vision of modern life. Meter is measure, a kind of compression which, in the right hands, lends language a supercharged memorability. In the wrong hands it sounds as mechanical as a player piano. Poets like Bly and Kinnell rejected meter before they had demonstrated any ability to make genuine use of it. No doubt their goals were in some way laudable, but legions of their followers have narrowed their poetics even further. I remember editors telling me in the 1980s that alliteration was "too rich" for contemporary poetry, as if we were all henceforth sentenced to a diet of bread and water. Of course generalizations are always unjust, but

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I can't help agreeing with Donald Hall when he finds much contemporary poetry lacking in ambition. In too many cases, the abandonment of a full range of auditory possibilities represents an abandonment of real standards.

I don't think this is true of Louis Simpson, however. Like Hall, he has consistently been a responsible and candid critic, keeping the idea of ambition alive while others fed slops to the bairns. Reading through Simpson's *Collected Poems* (1988), one finds a poet who has never written merely for critics or in self-congratulation, a poet who cares enough about readers to give them memorable moments. Among his early metrical poems, I like "Carentan O Carentan," "The Battle," "The Man Who Married Magdalene" and especially "To the Western World":

> A siren sang, and Europe turned away
> From the high castle and the shepherd's crook.
> Three caravels went sailing to Cathay
> On the strange ocean, and the captains shook
> Their banners out across the Mexique Bay.
>
> And in our early days we did the same.
> Remembering our fathers in their wreck
> We crossed the sea from Palos where they came
> And saw, enormous to the little deck,
> A shore in silence waiting for a name.
>
> The treasures of Cathay were never found.
> In this America, this wilderness
> Where the axe echoes with a lonely sound,
> The generations labor to possess
> And grave by grave we civilize the ground.

Simpson quotes that memorable final stanza in his new memoir, *The King My Father's Wreck,* a book that movingly revisits his life and art.[1] The poet of "To the Western World" and the blank verse narrative "The Runner" (so influential to younger narrative poets working now) has undergone a metamorphosis. One might say the butterfly has chosen to become a caterpillar:

> There was no precedent for the kind of poetry I wanted to write. Some years ago I had broken with rhyme and meter and learned to write in free form. Now I discarded the traditional ornaments of language, especially metaphors. I wanted to render the thing itself exactly as it happened.

[1] THE KING MY FATHER'S WRECK, by *Louis Simpson.* Story Line Press. $24.95; $14.95.

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Simpson received the Pulitzer precisely at that moment when the transformation of his verse had begun, with his ironic take on Walt Whitman: "The Open Road goes to the used car lot." Though he has produced intriguing poetry in the years since, he has also courted danger, choosing a slighter technical range that often highlights his lackadaisical diction.

The pursuit of directness in poetry is not new, of course. Wordsworth famously announced that "Poets do not write for Poets alone, but for men." Simpson describes the audience he sought as follows:

> They married and lived in houses; they had children, drove cars, went to work, shopped in supermarkets, and watched TV. Poetry hardly ever spoke of this . . . it did not speak of such lives except with irony and contempt. But I was one of those people . . . the only thing that made me different was being a writer. I wanted to speak of the life I had and tell stories about the men and women I knew. The stories would be in verse, for this was what I enjoyed . . . the rhythm of the line.

Here is Wordsworth again:

> If it be affirmed that rhyme and metrical arrangement of themselves constitute a distinction which overturns what has just been said on the strict affinity of metrical language with that of prose, and paves the way for other artificial distinctions which the mind voluntarily admits, I answer that the language of such Poetry as is here recommended is, as far as possible, a selection of the language really spoken by men; that this selection, wherever it is made with true taste and feeling, will of itself form a distinction far greater than would at first be imagined, and will entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life; and, if metre be superadded thereto, I believe that a dissimilitude will be produced altogether sufficient for the gratification of a rational mind.

Both Wordsworth and Simpson know that real poets give pleasure. Both believe in using a "selection" of the language of men, and both know the importance of taste and feeling, though they would differ where vulgarity is concerned. Simpson often avoids meter, and he approaches realms of experience Wordsworth never dreamed could be suitable for a poem. Witness the opening two stanzas of "How to Live on Long Island":

> Lilco, $75.17;
> Mastercard, $157.89;
> Sunmark Industries, $94.03 . . .

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Jim is paying his bills.
He writes out a check
and edges it into the envelope
provided by the company.
They always make them too small.

This deliberate banality signals, as Simpson has said of other poets, a revolution in taste. My question remains a simple one: Has this revolution been good for poetry? Despite my affection for poems like "Physical Universe," a brilliant suburban collage, I have to say that Simpson's technique leaves disturbing implications for the art.

In fact, though Simpson wrote some fine poems in meter, he now seems almost wilfully to misunderstand it. He loves Chaucer and many other English, Irish, Scots and American poets who have worked in fixed forms, but he comes close to that tired solecism that meter is un-American. His new book of essays, *Ships Going into the Blue*, contains an example of this.[2] "An American View of Pasternak" offers the following averment from the Russian poet:

> "I have never understood those dreams of a new language, of a completely original form of expression. Because of this dream, much of the work of the twenties was merely stylistic experimentalism and has ceased to exist. The most extraordinary discoveries are made when the artist is overwhelmed by what he has to say. In his urgency he uses the old language, and the old language is transformed from within."

Pasternak's statement seems to me the soul of wisdom, but Simpson responds that "The mainstream of American writing, as of American life, is 'formal experiment.' " Well, others before me have pointed out that mainstream American poetry is hardly experimental in its domestication of free verse. A few sentences later, Simpson makes the all-too-common mistake of assuming that Emerson's famous call for a "metre-making argument" connotes approval of free verse. In fact, Emerson's meaning is much closer to Pasternak's; good work in meter is driven by the urgency of argument and emotion.

Moments like this recur in Simpson's prose, and I find irritating passages in the verse as well. Because of his stance toward poetry, he can fall into facile phrasings that spoil whole poems. One needn't be banal in expressing banality. A poem like "The Pawnshop" is true in its way, but its conclusion is no more memorable than the average New Age handbook: "Each has its place in the universe." Simpson has worked terribly hard, it would seem, to create an aurally impoverished poetry.

[2] SHIPS GOING INTO THE BLUE: Essays and Notes on Poetry, by *Louis Simpson*. University of Michigan Press. $39.50; $13.95.

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These criticisms are important if we want to understand how and when Simpson's poems succeed. In his best free verse, one has the feeling of deliberately chosen language, a trained ear measuring lines by intuition and long practice:

> There is something in disorder that calls to me.
> Out there beyond the harbor
> where, every night, the lighthouse
> probes the sea with its feathery beam,
> something is rising to the surface.

Still, his delight in disorder lacks the precision of Robert Herrick—note how he repeats the filler word "something" in the above passage from the sequence called "Searching for the Ox." Both grammar and attitude become passive; the reporter nearly subdues the poet.

As I said at the beginning of this essay, Simpson's successes and failures are particularly his, yet also unthinkable at any other point in literary history. Both public trends and private life have driven this restless search for a new form. In "Working Late," one of his best poems, I sense the shaping hand of an artist closing in on his true subjects:

> A light is on in my father's study.
> "Still up?" he says, and we are silent,
> looking at the harbor lights,
> listening to the surf
> and the creak of coconut boughs.
>
> He is working late on cases.
> No impassioned speech! He argues from evidence,
> actually pacing out and measuring,
> while the fans revolving on the ceiling
> winnow the true from the false.
>
> Once he passed a brass curtain rod
> through a head made out of plaster
> and showed the jury the angle of fire—
> where the murderer must have stood.
>
> For years, all through my childhood,
> if I opened a closet . . . bang!
> There would be the dead man's head
> with a black hole in the forehead.
>
> All the arguing in the world
> will not stay the moon.
> She has come all the way from Russia

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to gaze for a while in a mango tree
and light the wall of a veranda,
before resuming her interrupted journey
beyond the harbor and the lighthouse
at Port Royal, turning away
from land to the open sea.

Yet, nothing in nature changes, from that day to this,
she is still the mother of us all.
I can see the drifting offshore lights,
black posts where the pelicans brood.

And the light that used to shine
at night in my father's study
now shines as late in mine.

Though he finds universal feeling in this personal experience—and in a language of beautiful simplicity—I can't help noticing how good free verse often settles into metered lines at key points, as in the concluding trimeters of the poem.

Simpson quotes "Working Late" to conclude an especially sad chapter in *The King My Father's Wreck*. Just as the poem shifts subtly in time and space, associating the father's measured work and the mother's mystery with the speaker's own labors, the new memoir feels out a direction, its time scheme intuitive and nonlinear. The charm of both works derives from the confidence of the writer, the shaping sensibility almost invisible in the text. This excellent book circles its subjects—parents, past events, lost friends, a new marriage—suddenly revealing key pieces of information that illuminate everything that has come before them.

The chapter in which Simpson quotes "Working Late" begins with a startling revelation: "When our father died and the will was read my brother and I had been disinherited. He had left us a few hundred pounds—the rest of his large estate went to our stepmother. She had arranged matters so, and the day after the funeral she sent us packing." The pain of disinheritance haunts Simpson's work, and in the memoir his technique is particularly effective. Describing his parents' separation and his mother's departure for New York, he adds, "This was the great blow of my life, and it occurred in silence." He sees clearly how this trauma contributed to the kind of artist he became:

> I buried my anguish deep, and there it would remain, "A grief without a pang, vast, void, and drear." It would affect my life, especially my relations with women, but it harmed my imagination too, for you cannot suppress one part of feeling without suppressing others.

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The flat, declarative nature of much of his writing may have originated in a kind of shell shock that predates the war:

> I would see my mother again. One afternoon I went with my father to a house near the sea, at Bournemouth, that he was thinking of buying. It wasn't finished, it was littered with sawdust and wood. We were standing in the middle of an empty room when my mother appeared in the doorway. She was holding a pistol and pointing it at him. "Rosalind," he said, and walked across the room and took it from her hand. She fell to the floor and shrieked, frothing at the mouth.

Memory of family life often resembles memory of war, and *The King My Father's Wreck* contains many losing battles; its opening anecdote locates the ironic place of Waterloo in his boyhood imagination: "Like Thackeray I'm at a bit of a loss to know what it adds up to, fact and fiction, things that have happened and things I've read about or seen in movies." A lifelong stand-off with his father's imposing ghost underlies everything else he tells us about his Jamaican youth, the war, struggles to establish a career and recent travels. In his longest chapter, "The Vigil," Simpson visits his dying mother in Italy; he obsessively catalogues daily activities like sports and sightseeing, and we soon realize that they are diversions to keep him from focussing on the impending death. He struggles to live in the world, to enjoy himself, and sometimes he seems actually to succeed, but this avoidance of emotion surely suggests the old childhood wounds—exacerbated, perhaps, by the psychological toll of later combat. He allows his readers to discover for themselves what he is up to; the book's understatement lets us feel time's passage and the shape-changing presences that dominate memory. *The King My Father's Wreck* is, ultimately, a profound record of tenacity and love.

His new book of essays, *Ships Going into the Blue*, seems more haphazard, with the catchall quality most essay collections have, but it still makes absorbing reading. Simpson has published two earlier collections in the University of Michigan's "Poets on Poetry" series: *A Company of Poets* (1981) and *The Character of the Poet* (1986). In all three collections (unlike earlier prose books, *Three on the Tower* and *A Revolution in Taste*), occasional pieces rub shoulders with a few more substantial essays. Simpson's criticism is often refreshingly personal, as if we were overhearing after-dinner opinions on a variety of subjects. I've already said that I disagree with some of his ideas, and *Ships Going into the Blue* offers still more occasions for such disagreement, usually over trivial matters like the effect of word processing on literary composition (Simpson fails to see that the word processor has not made writing any easier at all—only typing), but the book also contains many fine and readable pieces I expect I will return to.

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Even in brief reviews one finds good insights, like this one about Robinson Jeffers:

> Grandeur has gone out of our view of things. Other qualities have taken their place—humor for one. But the note we heard in the *Old Testament*? In Milton and *Lear*? Jeffers had it in him, and when he was touched, and wasn't pontificating, he could write poetry of a kind, towering—the word suggests itself—that we have not had in America since.

This passage describes elements lacking in Simpson's own verse. Such catholicity of taste, the ability to appreciate writers unlike oneself, is the mark of a truly humane reader. Brief memoirs published here, "Humane Letters" and "Theatre Business," illuminate Simpson's times, and essays like "'The Precinct Station'—Structure and Idea" have sensible things to say about revision. His notebook entry on Postmodernism is one of the best short discussions of that baffling phenomenon I know, and his concluding lecture, "Thoughts about a Doubtful Enterprise," proves an important document concerning poetry's relation to a civil culture. Here Simpson demonstrates that he does not believe merely in recording the world as it is, but also in the transformative power of the imagination. He would probably make no apologies for the contradictions of his career, however, and future anthologists will have to determine the effect of such contradictions on the poems he leaves behind.

These books have one chapter in common, the tiny piece called "A Window," apparently set in the poet's study on Long Island. It is so brief that I may as well quote it whole:

> Breezy and cold, a sun like a diamond blazing so that you can't look at it . . . the trees and hedge in front of my window are dark shapes. When I think that every day of my life I look at the sky and earth directly, it's a blessing.
>
> It says to me, Write! But it doesn't say what about. That is where nature leaves off, cuts the towline . . . where work starts and those who can't do it fall astern. Up ahead are great ships going into the blue.
>
> Miriam comes back from the walk she takes every afternoon and stops by my study to press her face to the glass and make a mouth like a goldfish. These are the whims that make life worth living. There are people who know this, and then there are the others who provide us with our daily quota of bad news.
>
> Aristotle said that humanity is the animal that lives in a *polis*. How about, the animal that makes faces?

That deflating humor, that earthbound understatement with its paradoxical belief in directness and imagination, seems to me the essence of Louis Simpson's singular charm.

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JOHN GREENING

Poetry Chronicle

DO WE STAY OR DO WE MOVE? It would be hard for anyone to survive in modern society without facing this question: but for our poets it is an issue that runs particularly deep. Indeed, it could be seen as the ur-force behind the Modernist creation myth; and it might well explain something of the incompatibility felt between, say, the tribes of Ashbery and of Larkin. Poetry is about ways of looking. Some poets, like Frost or W.C. Williams, stay put—and look long and hard and close. Others move on, follow Pound, seeking the stimulating jab of a glimpse. Many don't look at anything other than themselves and the odd color postcard from abroad—Stevens showed that this too can succeed. The poets under review here all look in different ways, whether it be at Roman ruins or their own back yard, and translate their looking into different musics. For poetry is also about ways of singing.

Appropriately, the first collection here, by Ted Kooser,[1] has on its cover a TV screen superimposed over cattle grazing the Great Plains: a frantic small world of the instant flickering on in ignorance of other calmer ruminations. This intriguing image—and Dana Gioia's recommendations in "Can Poetry Matter?"—made me eager to read it, but it was only when I was halfway through that I began to catch Kooser's music. Until then it seemed unambitious, flat, the conceits were contrived, other poets had done the same thing better . . . But this is the danger for all reviewers: too busy searching for influences, word-spotting, one ignores the freshness all around. I remember this happening with another poet whose diction is "plain" (and about whom I wrote in Volume XLVIII, Number 1, Spring *HR*)—Edward Thomas; and it seems to be a common experience in art that what we eventually perceive as simply profound at first eludes us. Remember those teen-age shrugs over Mozart? That incomprehension at Sibelius' 7th?

Not that I am going to let Ted Kooser get away with everything. I am not sure that the twelve lines of "Poem before Breakfast," for instance, about an encounter with "a small brown bird" stand beside the twelve lines of Hardy's "Proud Songsters." The poet feels "blessed to receive it," but the reader may not feel blessed by the magic finger

[1] WEATHER CENTRAL, by *Ted Kooser*. University of Pittsburgh Press. $19.95; $10.95.

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of poetry. Nor do all the longer poems cohere—"In the Late Spring" comes across as an over-indulgent reverie. But the strengths are there: in the sheer variety, the humor, the high risk imagery; in the continuing Frost tradition of dialogue with the earth; in the encounters with primitive debris washed up from the American wilderness. "Another Story" is typical, about digging up a cowbell that will not ring (a metaphor for contemporary poetry if ever there was one). Or "Ditchburning in February," striking for its evocation of fire in the language of flood, reminiscent again of Edward Thomas' meeting with half-mythological men of the land: "A man about my age stood ankle-deep / there in the shallows, hanging his weight / on a long-handled spade, pressing / the wood to his cheek." Few are the poets who can capture such elusive moments, make them inexplicably memorable. "A Ghost Story" achieves as much as one of C.K. Williams' urban dramas in a tenth of the space. Note the casually anecdotal manner, its nicely judged final couplet ("grave/gave"), the apt choice of "cowlick." Here is the complete poem:

> Her life was plain, her death
> a common death—a girl
> sewn into the watery shroud
> of pneumonia. She was only
> another Mary, there
> in Illinois, and it was only
> another April—the buds
> of the honeysuckle folded
> in prayer. Forgotten eyes,
> forgotten smile, the cowlick
> in her hair forgotten;
> everything gone. Yet for
> seventy years her grave
> gave off the scent of roses.

Kooser offers some fine historical/autobiographical work too, as when he recalls the Gilbert Stuart *Portrait of Washington* in his old schoolroom: "We thought / those aisles were parallel, that our days / would never arrive at the vanishing point. / Before us always, he who could never tell a lie / kept his jaws closed on the truth," a conclusion both graceful and unsentimental. His customary voice is rational, restrained, wary, observant; but he can howl with the wind—as in "Snakeskin," where the skin becomes to Nebraska what Stevens' jar was to Tennessee, echoing another Stevens poem in "All it knows is behind it already. / Nothing it knows is ahead." This is a poet conscious of the world's spin (he refers to it a couple of times), but never portentous. My eight-year-old daughter loved "Peeling a Potato," "The Mouse in the Piano" and "Sparklers"; and a motley gathering of a dozen poetry lovers in an English village relished

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hearing "A Sound in the Night" read to them a few weeks ago. Re-reading that wonderfully chilling poem finally persuaded me that Ted Kooser is a poet whose company will always be welcome, whether in Nebraska or East Anglia.

By contrast, I had expected very little from Philip Levine's *The Simple Truth*,[2] having read *Ashes* and rather agreeing with Helen Vendler that his notion of a poem "is an anecdote with a flush of reflexive emotion gushing up at the end" and that his line breaks were particularly unimaginative. But I must say that I found this new book of an altogether different order. The poems immediately engage the attention, often opening mid-journey ("Early August, hours west of Omaha . . . " "You pull over to the shoulder / of the two-lane / road . . . "), in no doubt about the answer to that prime question. We move. This is a poetry of travel that itself travels—always threatening to lose its way (see "Out by Dark"). Where Kooser is rooted, Levine is restless. He displays no particular knowledge of the minutiae of nature (though the same Frostian wilderness calls in "Ask for Nothing"): things, people, memories, ideas flash in the verse like something glimpsed beyond the windshield. There is none of Kooser's slow, absorbed meditation, only a nervous sense of life as a journey to the grave:

> The wind
> that swirled the sand that day years ago
> had a name that will outlast mine
> by a thousand years, though made of air,
> which is what I too shall become, hope-
> fully, air that says quietly in your ear,
> "I'm dust and memory, your two neighbors
> on this cold star." That wind, the *Levante*,
> will howl through the sockets of my skull
> to make a peculiar music. When you hear it,
> remember it's me, singing, gone but here,
> warm still in the fire of your care.
> "Dust and Memory"

This may be emotion, but is not, I think, gush. These are memorable, unflinching, gritty-tongued narratives. There is an urgency in the writing, for all its relaxed pace. Kooser might stroll, but Levine takes to his car.

The ubiquitous Dana Gioia quotes "what will survive of us is love" on the dust jacket, but reading Levine's "One Day" I was reminded more of that bleak last poem of Larkin: "Unresting death, a whole day nearer now . . . " If Larkin had been able to admit to reading any

[2] THE SIMPLE TRUTH, by *Philip Levine*. Alfred A. Knopf. $20.00.

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foreign poetry, he might have enjoyed this blend of speculation, feeling, thought, anecdote and reminiscence. It is musically unfussy, but musical it is. It is also very funny. The dry wit makes the darkness less intimidating, and the light touch remains even in so devastating a confessional as "Listen Carefully." Levine is interested in people, but is able to mythologize his own life without seeming self-indulgent. "Tristan" shows his taste for rhetorical flourish, the wink, the dramatic gesture (alien to Ted Kooser, who on his own admission writes more for the solitary reader than an audience) and though a less Wagnerian writer than Levine one cannot imagine, here he makes compelling myths: "I carry the name with me, secretly, / saying it over and over as a charm, / for like the green glass round, / scarred now, and hidden in my wallet / at all times, it urges me out to sea." In "Soul" he maintains a characteristically wry, controlled tone remembering "the sudden flight / to Havana in 1947 in the hope of mastering / Latin ballroom dancing, my enlistment in the naval reserve / in order to acquire discipline and bearing, the marriage / to a fifteen-year-old suburban delinquent." The very plainness makes what Tadeusz Różewicz has called "a poetry of absolute transparency, so that the dramatic material might be seen through the poem, just as in clear water you can see what is moving on the bottom."

Nicholas Christopher wants to make us look at all kinds of exotic places and periods.[3] Harold Bloom read this book with "a sense of wonder"—and I did too, but I think we were wondering different things. I was interested in many of his topics and the book contains raw material for much good poetry. The 35 poems of the title sequence spin diverse cultural matter about the hub of a cold night in a city. But if such an ambitious cycle is to succeed it is through the imaginative connections that it sparks. For me, "5°" has something of the frigid virtuosity of "The Art of Fugue." For paradoxes and metaphysical connections to move us, they must carry with them a charge, a shock of illumination. Here there is only a rather weary circularity—so that once you have registered that a poem opens with a graveyard by a river, it becomes almost inevitable that it will end with blocks of ice in the river that resemble gravestones.

Do we stay or do we move? The poet desperately wants to move, but the poems sluggishly roll back downhill. This is not surprising, they are so burdened with quotation, which can be an effective device used sparingly, but the reader tires of openings like " 'Iron occurs native in meteorite' (according to / the dictionary)" . . . That he can incorporate so many bleeding chunks suggests that Christopher is not too fastidious about the sounds of words. In a poem from the other section of the book, he can write—"The red blossoms and nectar of the oleander (member / of the dogbane family) are so toxic . . . "—and remain

[3] 5° AND OTHER POEMS, by *Nicholas Christopher*. Viking, $24.95; Penguin, $12.95.

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unaffected by the magic of the word "dogbane" itself. He does not, frankly, seem excited by words. He defuses them, flattens them. What he appears incapable of doing is leaving his learning to glimmer from the bottom of Różewicz's pool. The temptation to show off has ruined many a poet:

> When she speaks, her lips do not move
> her voice never wavers—
> like Persephone, whose name in Greek means
> "she who brings destruction."
> (In Latin . . .
>
> "5°, Number 12"

The poetry is in the name, not in the explanation. One need only contrast this with "Persephone in the West" by Debora Greger (I discuss her work below), where she really *uses* the myth—or indeed with the quotation from Levine above, where the *Levante*/Levine coincidence kindles a glowing music against the cold. No doubt all poets can think of poems they have written in which they were so proud of a reference or a happy irony that they were tempted to highlight it. But poets must be like those cathedral builders whose most enduring work is a hundred feet up behind a pillar. Alas, art must conceal art: the rest is—as Les Murray puts it—"to the glory of God."

Floyd Skloot's first substantial collection reads like an autobiography: section one concentrates on memories of a difficult childhood, in which both parents are sharply characterized; then follow poems about being a parent himself (including some feelings every father or mother will recognize in "Hazards"); thirdly, work dealing with the onset of his illness, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome; and finally, poems that cling to the shores of experience—seascapes, glimpses of a beyond, and at least one death. This makes for a very satisfactory one-hundred-page book, yet there is no compromising of individual poems.

I very much enjoyed *Music Appreciation*,[4] its quietness, gentleness and—as one might hope from a collection with that title—genuine music. These are intelligent poems that wear their learning lightly and carry their emotional equipment unhistrionically. Skloot chooses plain subjects from the domestic scene so beloved of late twentieth-century poets (and so neglected in former centuries), but to this he brings an aloof lyricism, where the witty images, the taut playing of line against line, never divert the direct flight of his syntax. "Old Stories"—about the "second decade of marriage"—is typical. It ends with an image of a book, not a literary quotation:

[4] MUSIC APPRECIATION, by *Floyd Skloot*. University Press of Florida. $19.95; $10.95.

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Forty approaches.
It is the time apart, not
the time together. It is loose
skin, the six-mile run after work.
No papers
and sweet rolls Sunday
mornings. It is the tin
anniversary,
new wrinkles in old
stories, the text
hand-set and stitched, not perfect bound.

He will no doubt be labelled a formalist, for he is highly sensitive to the shapes words make on the page and to the sculpting of his themes. To me, that just means he is a good poet: and he is thus able to tackle highly emotional situations with the necessary restraint. He does not make an issue of rhyme, but he can use it with lyric simplicity ("Giftsong") and once or twice to devastating effect (see "Brain Scan"). His sestina is less successful just because he is no rhetorician and this is essentially a declamatory form. He also has a tendency to let single words drop off the end of one line into the next, which can look like the poet conveniently catching a rhyme word: "The great blue heron that once nested where / Balch Creek rushes down will fly over me / again, aroused by my being there so / early, knowing what I have come to know." But he is a splendidly modest sonneteer—no bombast, just a natural feel: look at "My Daughter Considers Her Body" or "Sonatina for Surf and Sandpiper," for example. There is also a sense of propriety rare in American poetry when he writes about sex. Yet it is unmistakably Eros dancing the "Sapphire Fandango," which begins: "We mastered the azure / fandango / early in our marriage . . ." and—in imagery that is witty and passionate—goes on to use the various shades of blue to follow the "deep blue movement" of married love.

"Blue is the sound that laps . . ." begins one of Debora Greger's poems[5] and hers is a poetry that makes us hear what it wants us to see. She stalks the language, beating it out of the wilderness, tracking it through a labyrinth of image and allusion. She is enthralled by the past and this new volume is an indirect critique of modern America in that she ignores so much of it, has to filter it through medieval stained glass or—in "The Hustler de Paris"—a French cinema screen: American lowlife rubs up against European high art as the "good tourist" leaves the Louvre to see "the young god, Paul Newman, / about to step into a pool hall's gloom / undubbed, only the picket fence / of French

[5] OFF-SEASON AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD, by *Debora Greger*. University of Illinois Press. $12.95p.

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subtitles between him and us." Do we stay or do we move? We never really left, she seems to say. As in the books of the late Amy Clampitt, England and The Grand Tradition of English verse glow through. She loves punningly to shadow well-known poems—"How would he love her? Let me count the waves . . .," "The street light / lies fair upon the strait . . ."—which can leave a whiff of the study, but then that is also her theme: "come to the window, / air-conditioned is the night air, / you can hear the comfort of its roar . . ." I was reminded of the work of Europeans such as Geoffrey Hill, Pauline Stainer, and the Rilke of "New Poems," with their wondrous transformation of the everyday into something marmoreally haunting. There is certainly none of Ted Kooser's bracing American air here. Greger likes indoors: museums, palaces, dusty houses of famous Englishmen—Keats's in Hampstead, Johnson's in London. Even "A Field of Rape," a powerful response to a farming trend that has transformed the English landscape, puts emphasis on the Latin names and the indoor processing of the oil seed.

Does this mean that Greger is "an academic poet"—a term that has often puzzled me? True, a number of these poems reach that point where their spark has been smothered in fuel. But when she is not over-decorative, she has a fine natural ear:

> Her arms missing, and her nose,
> a caryatid elevates the motes and beams of dust
>
> into the art of aging ravage by ravage.
> How beautiful the old gods in their idleness.
> "The Later Archaic Wing"

One is just admiring the conceit of the caryatids, feeling the rough edges of the statues, then comes that mellifluous cadence about the gods. She makes tapestry, a curiously ritualized verse full of emblems: very seventeenth-century, without the restlessness of Marvell or Lovelace. Yet these poets might well admire the wit ("the pagan god Nike / worshipped these latter days / down to his shoes"), the use of clinching, paradoxical last lines ("Dream isn't wish. It's wish fulfilled that's dream"); and would certainly recognize the painterly processes at work, the color symbolism, heraldic birds, even an updated Mower poem. She has the confidence of her own vision, has learnt from Stevens that a singing line can carry the most bizarre freight; yet these private obsessions are always aired with a Johnsonian sense of decorum, intriguing most when most they baffle. Above all it is her empathy with the past that convinces. She feels and makes us feel for the goddesses in "The Later Archaic Wing"; and her charming poems about Rome make impassioned connections between our age and that of the ancients. Strikingly, too, in "A Woman on the Dump," where the garbage heap is seen as capitalism's monument: "the first shift

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coaxes bulldozers to life, / sphinxes to tease the riddled rubble / into fresh pyramids of rot."

My first introduction to Basil Bunting was hearing his recording of "Briggflatts"—and since the sound of his poetry is so crucial, his Northumbrian accent so unique, this proved a useful experience. Listening to him read, we soon realize that the words are not to be rushed: here is no rough-and-ready forty-niner satisfied with the odd nugget. Here is a painstaking excavator, sifting the essential music from the language. This new volume[6] combines the original *Collected* with the recent *Uncollected*. It is a necessary book, even if it does not change much. "Chomei at Toyama" and "Briggflatts" still dominate. The original two sets of Odes still resonate. But now a few others, such as "A Song for Rustam," set up their own sympathetic vibrations with, for instance, the well-known "Let them remember Samangan . . ." ("In Samangan Rustam begot Sohrab" as Bunting's terse note tells us). And we gain a stronger sense of his deftness with Persian and Arabic meters in the additional "Overdrafts," versions of Manuchehri, Hafiz, Firdosi (his fascination with which is examined in helpful detail by Victoria Forde in *The Poetry of Basil Bunting*, Bloodaxe Books/Dufour Editions) as well as further evidence of his versatility in the surprising inclusion of a long children's poem, "The Pious Cat," adapted from Obaid-e-Zakani.

Versatile he certainly was, and re-reading the work I was astonished by the variety of moods and styles. For example, the Persian tour guide of "The Spoils" is given an alliterative Norse tang as if the soul of Omar Khayyám were wrapped in Lindisfarne sackcloth. There is more landscape description than I remember, a great deal more humor. "Poetry? It's a hobby. / I run model trains. / Mr. Shaw there breeds pigeons . . ." begins the wickedly funny "What the Chairman Told Tom." One is rocked from narrative to lyrical to satirical to exotic to erotic. Sometimes he is strictly formal, sometimes very loose. He can load every rift with ire or he can play the cabaret artist. He is lover, philosopher, pasticheur. We have grown used to poets shifting between cultures, but—unlike Pound with China—Bunting really did immerse himself in Persian society. He was consul there from 1945 and was so well known that he found himself in a crowd some years later, joining in the chant: "Death to Mr. Bunting!"

His poetry might well have died had a rather smaller crowd of fans not encouraged him to keep writing into the sixties and had the Fulcrum Press not brought out the original *Collected* in 1968. It is hard now to see why Bunting's virtues were not recognized earlier, but certainly there are several American poets who were quick to respond—Zukovsky, of course, but also Creeley, Merwin, Ginsberg, and even Ammons is foreshadowed in the fifteenth Ode. British poets

[6] COMPLETE POEMS, by *Basil Bunting*. Oxford University Press. £10.99p.

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have yet to absorb him, although as eminent a critic as Donald Davie thought fit to title his survey of modern poetry *Under Briggflatts*.

While never losing clarity of word and syntax, whether he rhymes, alliterates or runs free, Bunting packs every line full of urgent meaning, an urgency conveyed as much through sound as image or thought, allowing the word calls and their echoes to lead him on: but all this within a tight musical structure. Bunting always insisted that there could be no meaning in a poem without an appreciation of its music. His belief in the oral pleasures of verse made him a perfect recruit for the sixties readings circuit. But his is no mere performance: he makes no concessions to our age. He hovers above it, able—without sacrificing his contemporary tone—to quote from or refer to other times and people. This, of course, is what one might say of Pound, but Pound was a magpie; Bunting is like the hawk whose stoop he so vividly describes, "accurate, unforeseen, and absolute," who while hovering focuses on the earth, on a particular patch of earth—hence "Briggflatts," which is Bunting's "East Coker." Pound never had any such home. Perhaps Bunting will prove the more enduring poet? If the extent of a poet's preoccupation with time were to be a measure of his durability, then we could be sure of it because time prompts some of Bunting's most remarkable passages—from "Villon" of 1925 ("We are less permanent than thought") through "Briggflatts" of 1965:

> Fifty years a letter unanswered;
> a visit postponed for fifty years.
>
> She has been with me for fifty years.
>
> Starlight quivers. I had day enough.
> For love uninterrupted night.

to the Ode composed not long before his death in 1985:

> We have no course to set
> only to drift too long, watch too glumly, and wait, wait.

Bunting's achievement is to show that the very greatest poets can both move and stay.

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THOMAS M. DISCH

The Evidence of Things Not Seen

"FAITH," DECLARED PAUL, IN HIS EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS, "is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." "Faith," declares Alexander Cruden, at the head of a lengthy list of biblical citations under that heading in his concordance to the Old and New Testaments, "is a dependence on the veracity of another." It could be that faith is simply an agreement to be deceived, a proposition that neither Paul's definition, nor Cruden's, necessarily contradicts.

Since one man's faith may be another's folly, it is generally considered impolite to question openly even the dottiest supernatural beliefs of one's fellow citizens. Those who entertain peculiar or millennial beliefs can usually be counted on to assemble in some congenial fastness, where they will not be embarrassed by public scrutiny unless they misbehave, as in cases like Jim Jones's cult in Guyana or the Aum Shinrikyo sect in Japan. For the most part, no one pays fringe faiths much attention, and so the generations of gurus, ascended masters, Mahdis, and other self-proclaimed Messiahs sail into the aether of religious history, shrinking to the size of footnotes and then vanishing from sight altogether.

Thanks, however, to the industry and intelligence of Peter Washington, the editor of Everyman's Library, the snow jobs of yesteryear have been compacted into a single multi-biography, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon*, with an irreproachable scholarly apparatus (47 pages of notes and bibliography) and, more importantly, with an irresistible narrative brio.[1] Has anyone before Washington undertaken the Augean labor of writing a coherent history of the intellectual antecedents of the New Age? Professional doubters, such as those who write for *The Skeptical Inquirer*, have their hands full controverting the absurdities of the passing moment—UFO claimants, Satanic child abusers, and spoonbending psychics. And those who are busy tilling New Age fields will not wish to call attention to their shabby ancestors, who were, with few exceptions, a disreputable lot in the conduct of their lives, while their immense tomes, full of bygone flummeries, do not decant well.

[1] MADAME BLAVATSKY'S BABOON: A History of the Mystics, Mediums, and Misfits Who Brought Spiritualism to America, by *Peter Washington*. Schocken/Pantheon. $27.50.

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That is what makes *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* such a delight for readers who look to history for a higher form of gossip. The Merchant/Ivory film team could refine half a dozen good screenplays from the ore Washington provides—beginning with the raffish career of the title character, the author of *Isis Unveiled* (1875), co-founder of the Theosophical Society, and an archetypal con artist of the sort who can't resist glorying in her trickster capabilities.

Blavatsky regularly arranged for the Hidden Masters with whom she was in communication—Koot Hoomi, Serapis Bey, et al.—to "precipitate" sealed letters from the immaterial aether into the pockets of her acolytes. One such missive to a wavering recruit, Colonel Henry Olcott, instructed him that Blavatsky "had a special mission in the world, and must be cared for at all costs, even if caring for her meant sacrificing the colonel's other interests, such as his wife and children." Olcott dumped his wife and sons and became Blavatsky's lifelong patsy and her shill. After many wanderings they pitched their tents at Adyar, in India, and established the Theosophical Society. Blavatsky thrived as a spiritualist in Anglo-Indian circles, performing conventional psychic tricks, "making a brooch appear in a flowerbed, finding a teacup and summoning music out of thin air." Often detected in her impostures, Blavatsky loftily maintained that her seeming scamming was actually an integral part of the Hidden Masters' higher plan—which only she could apprehend. Even today she has her remnant of true believers: a review of Washington's book in the *New York Times Book Review* occasioned a reproachful letter from one such die-hard. As Washington observes, "There are those who argue still that if Blavatsky is a figure of scandal, it is only because the slanders on her reputation are signs of grace: the stigmata that all great martyrs must bear." There is even a kind of heroism in such loyalty, as who might say, "Well, yes, he *was* crucified, but I had dinner with him yesterday."

For Blavatsky the highest wisdom, as set forth in her books, transcended both Christianity and its then blackest *bête noire*, Darwinism. (The baboon of the title was a cherished bibelot, a stuffed "bespectacled baboon, standing upright, dressed in wing-collar, morning-coat and tie, and carrying under its arm the manuscript of a lecture on *The Origin of Species*.") "It was necessary," Washington argues, "for someone to show the way forward by denouncing both the Darwinians, who stood for false ideals of progress, and the Christians, who believe in false myths of salvation. Blavatsky's supporters argue that attacking both parties with their huge vested interests was bound to provoke a bitter response: hence the personal attacks on their idol."

Washington spends more of his time on the page recounting scandals than interpreting them, but in that passage he begins to suggest not only Blavatsky's appeal but that of the whole New Age mindset. New Agers want the best of both worlds, Here and Here-

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after. They want a pleasant afterlife, which requires some recourse to the miraculous, but they don't want it to be conditional upon their own good behavior. They applaud the libertinism of the Enlightenment but deplore its irreligion. The scandal of God, as Madame Blavatsky sensed (along with her countryman, Dostoevsky), is that he can be capricious, dispensing grace to reprobates and withholding it from the righteous.

This was, then as now, a gender-specific issue. Blavatsky, simply by asserting herself as a prophet and high priestess of a new religion, was making a feminist statement, one with which those who followed in her footsteps concurred: Annie Besant, initially an early advocate of contraception; Katherine Tingley, an American actress in the mold of Shirley MacLaine, who formed her own apostate, California branch of Theosophy; and innumerable others, down to the legions of lady psychics, seers, tarot readers, and astrologers in our own time. Women, as any woman knows, have as good a claim on Godhead and/or priesthood as men, and if this age won't acknowledge the justice of their claim, then let's have another. Believe in the Goddess and viva Blavatsky!

But the women have not been entirely alone in their mystic fane. There was, in those days (the *fin de siècle*), a love that dared not speak its name, but was, even so, hot to trot. Enter the pedophile and psychopathic liar, Charles Webster Leadbeater, whose biopic might more suitably be filmed by Ken Russell. Leadbeater's account of his own early life is, like Blavatsky's and Gurdjieff's official cv's, a parcel of succulent lies, but the life the lies were designed to camouflage was just as juicy. Pedophilia was to be, more than once, the spur to travel, both before and after Leadbeater's ascension to the rank of bishop in the Liberal Catholic Church, an apostate institution in which bishoprics were to be had for the asking. Liberal Catholics chiefly believed in candles, incense, and glitzy vestments, along with Atlantis, Mu, and all that is divinely decadent. It was an enduring tradition. In the early sixties I came upon a remnant of the creed, one Bishop Itkin, who was often noted, in the newspapers of the day, for his prominent episcopal presence at rallies of the Peace Movement. Like Leadbeater, Itkin found that if you called yourself a bishop and wore a pectoral cross you would be treated with the same deference as the genuine article, both by the media and by altar boys.

Leadbeater is the Mr. Micawber of *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon*, a deliciously predictable reprobate and opportunist. In the course of his career he scored at least as well as Father Bruce Ritter in our own era. He was disgraced repeatedly, but he would just expatriate himself and keep on scoring. Theosophy, by shrugging off a moral code, possessed a special attraction for homosexuals who wanted to love both God and man. Now that the more liberal Protestant churches have welcomed homosexuals into the ranks of the clergy, gays of a religious bent need not venture as far afield as Theosophy to enjoy the rites

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and consolations of the Christian faith. Only time will tell if Theosophy is strong enough to survive that loss.

Leadbeater's penchant for ephebes leads to the next, and most amazing biopic opportunity of this history—Krishnamurti. "One evening in the spring of 1909," Washington recounts, "Leadbeater noticed an extraordinary aura surrounding one of the Indian boys paddling in the shallows. The boys was dirty and unkempt. . . . The boy took his fancy, and within days Leadbeater had told his followers that this child was destined to be a great teacher. . . . "

The charm of Krishnamurti's story is much like that of the movie *Forrest Gump*, a fairy tale in which a simpleton, after only a little adversity, is blessed with all possible blessings because his heart is pure. Leadbeater intuited that young Krishna, known in the spirit realm as Alcyone, had lived thirty lives already, ranging in time from 22662 B.C. to A.D. 624, which Leadbeater began to chronicle in the pages of *The Theosophist*. "It turned out that in each of these thirty lives everyone else known to Leadbeater also figured, but with different identities and sometimes different sexes. Some had been famous historical characters. Others had lived on the moon and Venus." Alcyone's long saga became the means by which Leadbeater revenged himself on old enemies and theosophical rivals. Thus, in an earlier life, Mrs. Besant (in this life, too, a serial monogamist) "acquired twelve husbands for whom she roasted rats." Another Leadbeater scoop: Julius Caesar's marriage to Jesus Christ. The bishop could out-tabloid even the *Weekly World News*, and in this he prefigured the can-you-top-this spirituality of our own era, in which sheer imagination is confused with causality. Such fads as creative visualization, UFO abductions, and incest survivalism all conflate dreams and matters-of-fact, and they are licensed to do so by the intellectual deference long accorded to crackpot religions.

Leadbeater's tales of his divine Alcyone soon put the teenage Krishnamurti on the theosophical map. Mrs. Besant adopted "Krishna" and his sibling, Nitya, transported them to London and put them on a new dietary regimen of porridge, eggs, and milk. Leadbeater, a fanatic about good hygiene, personally attended their daily ablutions. The boys' father sued for repossession of his offspring, charging Leadbeater with "deification and sodomy." That is only the beginning of Krishnamurti's golden legend. By the sound of it, he was a rather nice fellow, his Godhead notwithstanding—a bit like Bertie Wooster in his happy blindness to his own astonishing privilege.

Three further gurus round out Washington's dramatis personae: George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1873?–1949), Peter Ouspensky (1878–1947), and Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). Gurdjieff was the most audacious of the lot, the self-appointed Svengali to several generations of mystical Trilbys. He bootstrapped himself from an impoverished childhood in Armenia to become, by 1912, the spiritual drill-

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master of his own small sect in Moscow. He kept his followers busy with a regimen of chanting and breathing exercises, modern dance, and character-building drudgery, a program of summer-camp monasticism much emulated by later gurus: Submission = inner peace.

At the height of his notoriety, in 1922, Gurdjieff had established his own school-cum-commune at the Château du Prieuré, forty miles outside Paris. Many noted intellectuals of the era made pilgrimages to the Prieuré—A.R. Orage, a prominent magazine editor who was chiefly responsible for Gurdjieff's celebrity; D. H. Lawrence, who wasn't about to be someone else's Trilby and didn't stay long; and most famously, Katherine Mansfield, who died there after a brief sojourn, her faith in Gurdjieff not being sufficient to cure her tuberculosis. Because of its unities of time, space, and action, Mansfield's few weeks of discipleship would be the best bet for a "Masterpiece Theatre" offering. Mansfield's *Liebestod* would supply the plot, and here is the *mise en scène*: "Society ladies who had never done a day's work would be set to peel[ing] potatoes or weed[ing] a flower border with teaspoons while learning a few Tibetan words or memorizing Morse code. Others were given complicated exercises in mental arithmetic while performing certain movements. A Harley Street doctor was deputed to light the boiler, writers cooked and chopped, and eminent psychiatrists shovelled manure or scrubbed the kitchen floor. The place had the atmosphere of a savage boarding school run by a demented if genial headmaster and most of the pupils loved it—for a while."

Peter Ouspensky was as drab a personage as Gurdjieff was colorful. Ouspensky's lifelong search for the miraculous began in the mists of pseudo-science, where he inferred from the mathematical postulate of time as "the fourth dimension" (the title of his first publication) the necessity of a Nietzschean eternal recurrence. This brainstorm shaded by degrees into an acceptance of reincarnation, occultism, and all the rest of the theosophical agenda. A visit to the Theosophical Society's HQ at Adyar only left him longing for a social environment large enough to swallow him whole. His wish—perhaps the essential impulse of a religious vocation—echoes Donne: ". . . bend / Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new. . . Take me to You, imprison me, for I / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free / Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me."

Ouspensky's prayers were answered when, just before World War I, he was taken before Gurdjieff and their long game of Captain-May-I began. Imprisoned, enthralled, and ravished, Ouspensky became Gurdjieff's John the Baptist and general dogsbody. His daily witnessing of his master's scams and caprices only snugged the bonds of love tighter, as in *The Blue Angel*. Just as their platonically sado-masochistic romance reached a rolling boil, the Russian Revolution kicked in, and Gurdjieff's little band of disciples, along with a small tribe of gypsy relatives, became refugees, seeking escape into

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Turkey. They caromed about the steppes of central Asia between the contending Red and White armies, giving modern dance recitals, living on mushrooms and berries, and gathering about the campfire at night to drink in the master's wisdom. It would require the budget of another *Dr. Zhivago*, but the dance sequences on the battlefield could be stunning. *Le Sacre du printemps*? George C. Scott *is* Gurdjieff. Gene Hackman would pass muster as Ouspensky, though, really, it's a role anyone could handle. That was Ouspensky's problem.

Rudolf Steiner—a guru only insofar as that was one of the duties he imposed on himself as a universal genius and world redeemer—was the son of Austrian peasants and had a childhood that would have been the envy even of Wordsworth. Nature spoke to him incessantly. As he matured, Steiner tried to translate these intimations into a theory that would controvert positivistic science, and so, with some scraps of Goethe's errant optical and biological theories and with deep draughts of Kant, he began to construct his Summa. Then Madame Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* blew his Summa out of the water. He converted to Theosophy in 1902 and became the Society's leader in German-speaking lands.

Of all Washington's leading actors, Steiner was the dullest, the most conventionally respectable, and the most successful. He lived to see two cathedralish Goetheanums built according to his own Art-Nouveau-like specifications (the first one, of wood, burned down), and the system of Steiner schools is still around to offer progressive education with a theosophical flavor. Should the government ever establish a National Endowment for Occult Science, it would have to find someone like Rudolf Steiner to be its chairman.

As the chronicle approaches our own time, the roster of theosophical dabblers and day-trippers multiplies. There are index entries for Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, Bob Dylan, and recent leaders of the Liberal Party in England. The last of Washington's gurus, Idries Shah, seems to have been sent down from on high specifically to prove the theory of eternal recurrence. Like Blavatsky, Shah was in touch with "an invisible hierarchy which had chosen him to transmit their wisdom to suitable individuals. He was now looking for European pupils and helpers, and for introductions to the rich and powerful whose help he needed to transform the world. To this end he had founded SUFI: the Society for Understanding Fundamental Ideas."

Shah managed to connect with one of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky's most devoted disciples, Captain J. G. Bennett. Now an old man and a spiritual orphan, Bennett was persuaded in the 1960s to turn over a valuable English estate at Coombe Springs, which had served for many years as a Gurdjieff-style Prieuré. When the other trustees of the estate balked, "Shah was adamant: there must be an outright gift or nothing at all. Bennett tried to negotiate, but the more conciliatory his behavior, the more outrageous Shah's demands became. The new

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teacher wanted to know how Bennett could have the nerve to negotiate with the Absolute." Once the Absolute had got his way, "Shah's first act was to eject Bennett and the old pupils from their own house, banning them from the place except by his specific permission. His second act was to sell the property to developers for £100,000 in the following year, buying a manor house at Langton Green near Tunbridge Wells in Kent with the proceeds."

Why do they do it? Why do fools fall in love—and believers believe, even as they're being fleeced? I think it is Pascal's wager applied to the realm of personal finance. Just as gamblers gamble from a secret desire to know the thrill of utter ruin, so believers need to immolate themselves upon the altars of the Absolute in order to prove themselves worthy of the sacrificial fires. The experience may not last long, but the thrill must be exquisite. For those who prefer to experience that thrill vicariously, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* gets you close enough to smell the singed hair.

"In great works of art we recognize a great and splendid light; perhaps not *in* the words but *behind* them." – *Hayden Carruth*

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Letters to the Editors

Dear Editors:

I very much enjoyed Thomas M. Disch's "The Castle of Indolence" in your Winter 1995 issue. What he has to say about creative writing programs is both intelligent and encouraging.

There are a few aspects of the subject he does not touch on and which I would like to note here. Among these is the outstanding fact that very few teachers of creative writing are themselves masters of the art, and their influence on their students would be questionable on that ground alone. Not long ago, in an issue of AWP *Chronicle*, I read an article written by an instructor in the writing program at one of our major universities, and who quoted, with apparent approval, some lines from a well-known woman poet. The lines quoted were, as verse, virtually inert, lacking any metrical justification, and with no real subject beyond her grievance with a parent. But the author of the article seemed not to be aware of this. Presumably, then, her tastes will be impressed on her students, and the negative example be repeated.

We can add to this that many professor poets will encourage younger writers to imitate their particular style and preferences. It follows too that these resident poets may adopt certain of their students, make of them proteges or disciples as a way of furthering their own careers; and these, so chosen, will enter the system and repeat the error.

A closely related fact is that aspiring candidates are encouraged to produce—to write and publish, whether or not they are deeply motivated, whether they have anything of substance to say; a practice (and it soon becomes a habit) that all too easily carries over into a teaching career in which one is more or less prodded to produce a new book every two or three years if she or he expects to be employed or be given tenure. The swamp of second- and third-rate writing is easily accounted for.

The industrial character of all of this has been ably described by Wendell Berry in his "Unspecializing Poetry," from which I quote:

> As in manufacturing, the occasion of the making of a poem has come to be the availability of raw material, not need.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> . . . A poem is not an "object." This is hard to accept in a mechanical age.

In connection, one recalls that assertion sometimes encountered in the advertising of a writing program: "We can save you time." Time

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for what? It is a way of thinking appropriate to a management carreer, perhaps, but entirely out of place in the literary arts.

Can even the most ideally motivated young writer avoid being influenced (one wants to say "contaminated") by this environment? Unlikely. Among other characteristics, one might point to a peculiar mixture of arrogance and conformity as the identifying mark of the MFA system.

It is both instructive and refreshing to reread the essays of Matthew Arnold, to witness his dialogue with culture and society, in contrast to the closed system in place today. Neither Arnold nor Wordsworth (nor for that matter, neither Williams nor Pound, nor Yeats nor Eliot) would have discussed poetry in such a way as to separate its moral force from the esthetic element. To do this is an affliction of our time, the consequence of an extreme specialization.

And then we must ask: Why do so many aspiring young writers feel they must rely on the opinion of a workshop instructor and, often enough, shape themselves accordingly? Why not do as the true poets have always done: read their great predecessors and learn from them? These have been with us for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, and when all is said and done they are still the best, the only reliable teachers.

It may seem a bit odd, in the context, to quote the German sociologist, Max Weber; but Weber saw at the beginning of our century the bureaucratic tendency of the age, and of which he had in part the following to say:

> This passion for bureaucratization fills one with despair . . . the question is not how to promote and accelerate this process, but rather what do we have to set against this machinery so that some portion of humanity will be spared from this parcelling out of the soul, from this total domination of the bureaucratic ideal.

These words of Weber seem to me entirely relevant to the institutional character of creative writing, and consistent with the bureaucratic structure of which it is now a part.

Fairbanks, Alaska John Haines

Thomas M. Disch writes as follows:

What can I say to Mr. Haines except to thank him for his letter? He agrees with me, and I with him, and what better consolation can there be in a world of error?

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Dear Editors:

Since I consider Elizabeth Bishop the finest English-language poet of the last fifty years, I'd like to make a few points in response to Joseph Epstein's essay.

1. Quantity of the oeuvre: Epstein's remarks reminded me of the professor who told Yvor Winters he'd always assumed Wordsworth was a great poet because he wrote a lot of poetry. A slim volume like Bishop's *Geography III* contains far more poetry of merit than beached whales like Lowell's *History* and Berryman's complete *Dream Songs*. It's worth remembering that the reputations of some minor poets may rest largely on a single poem; Gray's "Elegy" is the obvious example.

2. Mastery of the medium: Bishop's reputation is high among fellow poets who recognize her mastery of rhythm, diction, tone, and texture. Whereas much of Lowell's best work is marred by blunders of tone and diction, Bishop's work holds up under the most searching examination. For Bishop, tone and texture are at least as important as image, but our critical aesthetics has not found ways of talking about them. To choose only one example, a phrase like "titanium white, one dab" (from "Poem") makes words from radically different orders of diction—"titanium" and "dab"— seem like natural companions. Admirable, too, is the way Bishop's poems seem to develop spontaneously, even improvisationally, while the structure of the poem satisfies on repeated readings.

3. Absence of an overview: The final stanza of "Poem" may be her closest approach to articulating an overview. Like some of the Latin poets, Bishop writes of the delights and losses of this world, and has no belief in an afterlife or other revealed truth. Her lack of belief in a particular religious or political ideology may be one reason her poems still seem fresh.

Elizabeth Bishop may not fit our abstract notion of what a great poet ought to be (Philip Larkin presents the same kind of problem). There are areas of experience she does not examine and kinds of poems she does not write. Nonetheless, few if any of her contemporaries and successors can equal her finest two dozen or so poems.

San Antonio, Texas David Dooley

Joseph Epstein writes as follows:

I feel no need to answer this lucid and respectable letter that states another opinion about Elizabeth Bishop.

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Dear Editors:

In his film review, "Schindler's Miss" (Spring 1995), Bert Cardullo writes: "But these Jews, like those Nazis, should have been the subject of—not a footnote in—any latter-day Holocaust film, in order to reveal the Nazi and the Jew, the moneychanger and the art-lover, the wolf and the sheep in all of us."

By analogy one could say that Shakespeare should have made Rosencrantz or Laertes or Ophelia the protagonist of *Hamlet*—for whatever reason imaginable.

It's an intriguing kind of argument, in which potentially all of literature might be rewritten, but it is false.

Gig Harbor, Washington Ross R. Whitney

Bert Cardullo replies:

First of all, *Schindler's List* is not the greatest of Holocaust films, as *Hamlet* is the greatest of Elizabethan revenge tragedies, so it is Mr. Whitney's analogy that is false, not my argument. *Schindler's List* is a melodrama, an art (artificial?) form inferior to tragedy, and it repeats the platitudes of earlier Holocaust melodramas, albeit in glitzier cinematic form.

I would *not* say, therefore, that Shakespeare should have made Rosencrantz the protagonist of *Hamlet*, since *Hamlet* needs no rewriting or revision—though Tom Stoppard and Lee Blessing might disagree, as their *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Fortinbras* respectively show (and as Paula Vogel's *Desdemona* shows vis-à-vis *Othello*). I'm not calling for the rewriting of all literature and film, just the mediocre-to-bad sort! My point was that, unlike Steven Spielberg, a real director would have made a different, superior film about the Holocaust, not a repetitious, sanctimonious one. But that would have taken a lot of courage—something that's in short supply among artists of all kinds in this politically correct era. And it would have required spectators superior to Ross R. Whitney in aesthetic perception.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ROBERT SCHULTZ teaches at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa. With regard to "When Men Look at Women," he writes us as follows: "I wrote the essay while a Resident Fellow at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy in Charlottesville, Virginia. The material and intellectual support afforded me there was crucial in allowing me to do this work." . . . JAMES W. TUTTLETON is the author of *The Novel of Manners in America* (W.W. Norton, 1974) and the co-editor (with Kristin O. Lauer and Margaret Murray) of *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge University Press, 1992). . . . BRUCE BAWER is a columnist for the *Advocate*. His book *Prophets and Professors: Essays on the Lives and Works of Modern Poets* will be published this year by Story Line Press. . . . ROBERT McDOWELL's book-length poem, *The Diviners*, is being published in September by Peterloo Poets (England). After four games of the 1995 Oregon Senior Mens' Baseball League season, he was hitting .386 (5 for 13). . . . ROBERT BLY's most recent book is *Meditations on the Insatiable Soul: Poems* (HarperCollins, 1994). . . . In January 1996, Viking will publish STEPHEN DOBYNS'* ninth book of poems, *Common Carnage*. . . . CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY's sixth book, *Dark Matter*, was published by Copper Beech Press in 1993. . . . ELLEN POTTER* lives in upstate New York with her husband and four large dogs. She has a B.A. in Creative Writing from SUNY Binghampton. . . . LAURENCE LIEBERMAN's *The St. Kitts Monkey Feuds* has just been published by The Cummington Press. His *Beyond the Muse of Memory* (essays on contemporary American poets) will be published by University of Missouri Press this fall.

PATRICIA HOOPER's* first book, *Other Lives*, was awarded the Farber First Book Award of the Poetry Society of America. . . . EMILY GROSHOLZ will be publishing this year, with La Tribune Internationale des Langues Vivantes in Paris, a small collection of translations of the poetry of Yves Bonnefoy. . . . Paperback editions of two of RICHARD HORNBY's books are due out from Applause Theatre Books this fall: *The End of Acting* and *Script into Performance*. . . . JOHN LOUGHERY is the author most recently of *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* (Henry Holt). . . . BERT CARDULLO is co-editor, with Alain Piette, of the forthcoming collected plays of the Belgian writer Fernand Crommelynck. . . . Graywolf Press has just brought out WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD's *English Papers: A Teaching Life*. . . . DAVID MASON's next book of poems, *The Country I Remember*, will be published by Story Line Press in the fall of 1996. . . . JOHN GREENING's new collection of poems, *Fotheringhay*, is published by Rockingham Press, 11 Musley Lane, Ware, Herts., UK. . . . THOMAS M. DISCH's most recent books are *The Priest: A Gothic Romance* (Knopf) and *The Castle of Indolence* (Picador), the title essay of which first appeared in *The Hudson Review*.

**Asterisk indicates a new contributor.*

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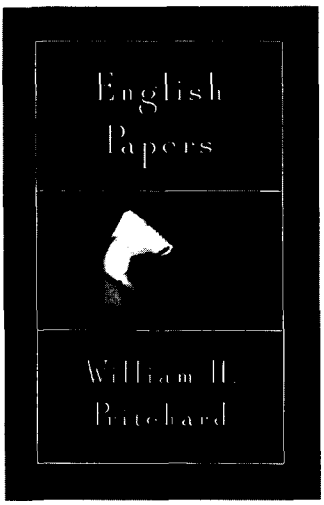

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Pritchard is the Henry Clay Folger Professor of English at Amherst College, Massachusetts.

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Publication Date: October 1995 / Cloth, $22.95 / ISBN: 1-55597-234-9

Graywolf Press
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IN THIS ISSUE:

Male gaze theory, with its focused political intentions, has made an excellent starting point for reflection and action, troubling men out of the crystalline jail of unexamined fantasy. But neither men nor women will be satisfied with a theory that cannot imagine a guiltlessly gazing man or an actively desiring woman.

—Robert Schultz, "When Men Look at Women: Sex in an Age of Theory," p. 365.

If this country has historically spawned more than its share of new religions, each with its own detailed, uniquely inerrant dogma, and if fundamentalist Christianity—with its fanatical (albeit selective) devotion to the brutally categorical codes of Leviticus and its literal understanding of Revelation—has won countless adherents, it is largely because Americans have always been a pragmatic people, ill at ease with supernatural ambiguities and abstractions and eager for clear-cut answers, explicit guidelines, and rigid edicts.

—Bruce Bawer, "God on the Bestseller List," p. 397.

The consequence of the bankruptcy of all religion now (except for the saving remnant) is that the public affairs of this nation—in government, in social services, in the media, in public education, etc.—are mainly run (and used by) what might be called the new immoralists. They have no beliefs or convictions, short of hedonistic pleasure and self-aggrandizement, and they have no capacity to understand the remnant who retain their faith, espouse an old-fashioned morality, and live in a different time warp.

—James W. Tuttleton, "Rehabilitating Victorian Values," p. 388.

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